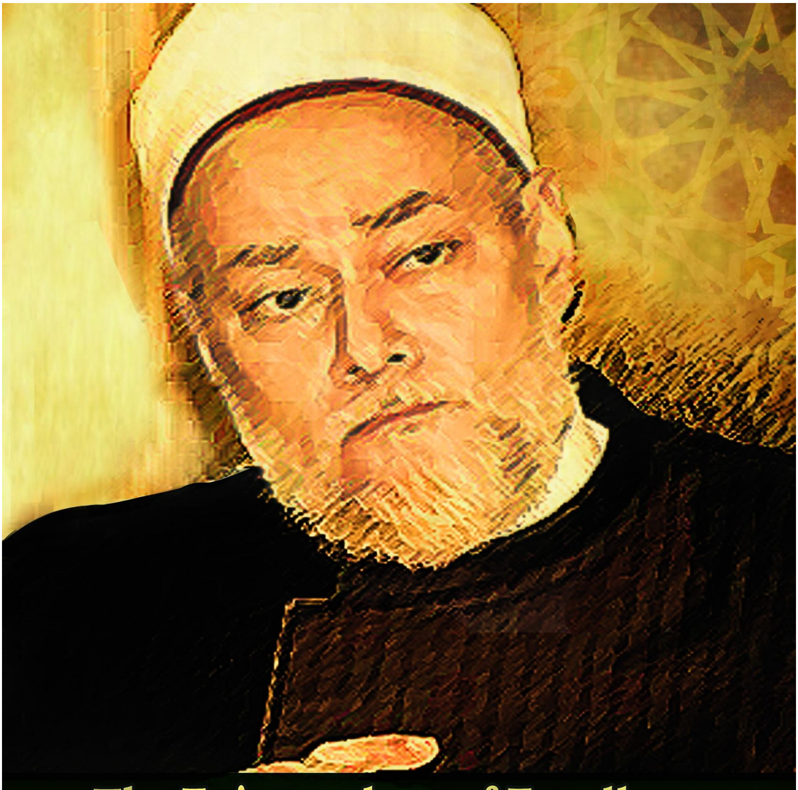


# The Epistemology of Excellence

*By: Dr.Ibrahim Negm*

*A Journey into the Life and Thoughts of the Grand Mufti of Egypt*

# The Epistemology of Excellence:

# A Journey into the Life and Thoughts of the Grand Mufti of Egypt

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# Contents

## Introduction

The Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr. Ali Gomaa, is one of the Muslim world's most influential scholars and public intellectuals. He is read widely in the Muslim world, especially amongst Arabic speakers. However, to date, English-language speakers have largely been deprived of an in-depth study of his views. This monograph seeks to fill this gap by presenting an overview of the life and works of the Grand Mufti, with special attention to his positions on some of the most pressing matters facing both Muslims and non-Muslims in the contemporary world.

The reader will be introduced to the major highlights of the Grand Mufti's life, his upbringing and education, his major influences and teachers, and his lengthy career experience serving *the Muslim global community (Umma ).* As well, the reader will be given a thorough survey of the impressive intellectual output of Dr. Gomaa.

Dr. Gomaa is a prolific writer, having published more than seventy works spanning four decades. Throughout, he has made a number of noteworthy contributions to the fields of Islamic juristic methodology (*Usūl al-fiqh*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). These represent his initial and primary area of specialty, given that he holds a PhD from Al-Azhar University's Faculty of Sharī'ah and Law. In this capacity, his scholarly works are meticulously researched and reveal an erudite mind and top-notch scholarship.

He has, however, also written widely in a number of other fields, including Sufism, Prophetic biography, Qur'anic studies and global issues. This is all in addition to his lengthy list of interventions in newspapers and on television programs, and his contributions to the rich fatwa literature of the period.

In this book, special attention has been paid to crucial issues of relevance in the contemporary world. These include the role of women in Islam, the proliferation of radical extremists in Muslim countries, the proper understanding of jihad, the crucial importance of dialogue, solutions to the environmental crisis, and how Muslim minorities ought to deal with their social and political contexts. Throughout, the Grand Mufti is quick to take moderate positions, and outline his well thought-out justifications for his convictions.

In addition to his scholarly position, the Grand Mufti has become a public intellectual, given his involvement in a number of charitable projects under the auspices of his social welfare organization, Misr El-Kheir. He has also repeatedly emphasized the importance of dialogue in establishing a peaceful and harmonious state of affairs in both Egypt and across the world. These efforts have impressed a number of Western observers. Their testimonials to the work of Sheikh Ali are made available in the final chapter.

It is hoped that this work will go some way in introducing the English-speaking world to the important contributions made by Sheikh Ali Gomaa, a man who has been remarkably successful both in his academic pursuits and in his quest for social justice.

## Chapter 1: A Biography

The present Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr. Ali Gomaa, is a product of the fertile soil of Egypt, the land of religious awareness and the home of al-Azhar, the Minaret of Islamic knowledge and Islam's most august seat of learning. Dr. Ali Gomaa represents the latest example and torch-bearer of the great tradition of scholarship and learning that has characterized the nation of Egypt, which has given rise to countless scholarly luminaries.

As a representative of the rich tradition of Islamic learning, Dr. Gomaa represents a humane and balanced figure, a breath of fresh air in a world in which Islam is identified more with the extremist aberrations of fringe figures than by the historical example of tolerance, moderation and culture it has long contributed to the world. Given his training and ethical upbringing, Dr. Gomaa is a leading advocate of moderation and staunch critic of extremism on the Muslim intellectual scene.

The Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr. Sheik Ali Gomaa, is one of the leading Islamic scholars of his time. Born in Upper Egypt in 1952, Dr. Gomaa inherited from his parents the values of a family of learning and religion. Raised in a traditional family by a father specialized in law and Sharīʻah and a pious mother, Dr. Ali grew up with high moral values, including a strict respect for and diligence towards piety and a profound appreciation for the pursuit of knowledge. While his mother's impeccable character has served as a central example and a source of love and warmth for the Sheik both in his childhood and after, his father was a prominent lawyer from whom the Grand Mufti imbibed a love of reading, and a deep concern for social justice. In addition to imparting his example of avidly searching for knowledge, his father also planted in him the

seeds of confidence and strength to speak up for what is right, without fearing the consequences, and putting his sole trust in God. This early training from the Sheikh's family represented the first influence on his sensitive personality and prepared him for the heavy responsibilities that have confronted him throughout the various stages of his life to date.

As a youth, Dr. Gomaa enrolled in private lessons in the religious sciences alongside his secular schooling, completing the memorization of the Holy Qur'an at an early age, and his formal study of the canonical books of *hadith* and the Maliki school of jurisprudence by the time he graduated from high school. He accomplished all this despite he had not been enrolled in religious schools. In 1969, he moved to Cairo where he earned his high school diploma.

When it was time to decide on the college where he would join to continue his university studies, Dr. Ali had the choice to enter either the faculty of engineering or the faculty of commerce. His father, who had always supported his inclination towards the Islamic disciplines, encouraged him to join al-Azhar University, something his mother was not very much in favor of. Dr. Ali settled for the Faculty of Commerce at Ain Shams University, wisely judging that this course of study would spare him time to continue his extracurricular religious studies while following his university curriculum.

And indeed, the enthusiastic young scholar took it upon himself throughout his four years of formally studying commerce to read and memorize all the religious textbooks he would have studied had he been enrolled at the al-Azhar schools. He studied all the curricula of al-Azhar primary, preparatory, and high schools, which included works in jurisprudence, Arabic grammar, Quranic recitation, and Hadith methodology.

He acquired a Bachelor's degree in Commerce in 1973, at which point he decided it was time to fully immerse himself in Islamic knowledge, by enrolling at the famed al-Azhar University, the oldest and most prestigious center of Islamic studies in the world.

Therefore, he joined the College of Arabic and Islamic Studies at al-Azhar University, from which he earned a Bachelor’s degree in 1979. Having now sparked his passion for Islamic knowledge, the young Faqih[1] could not stop at that point. He embarked on graduate studies, earning an MA from the Faculty of Sharī‘ah and Law at al-Azhar (1985) and later a PhD (1988). His doctoral dissertation on Islamic jurisprudence was hailed by a discussant as one of the most sophisticated and thorough theses submitted to the Faculty.

In addition to his official affiliation with al-Azhar, Dr. Gomaa continued to immerse himself in the informal intellectual and scholarly circles that formed in and around the famed institution, all the while continuing to travel widely in search of knowledge and the knowledgeable. As an avid participant in study circles in disciplines spanning the spectrum of traditional Islamic learning, he obtained *ijaza*s (formal licenses to teach the works he had studied) from some of the most prominent scholars of his generation. He spent time with many clerics and masters of the Sharī‘ah disciplines who set him upon a long spiritual path of learning and sacrifice that took him to several places across the world, introduced him to many people and exposed him to different experiences that greatly shaped his perception. Most influential of these sheikhs was the Moroccan Hadith scholar Sheikh Abdullah bin Siddiq al-Ghumari who considered Sheikh Ali to be one of his most gifted students. Ghumari came from a family of prominent Hadith scholars in Morocco, and had a great impact at al-

1 A Faqih is an expert in Islamic Jurisprudence

Azhar during his stay in Egypt, being acknowledged as one of the foremost scholars of his time. Sheikh Ghumari recognized in Sheikh Ali early signs of a great scholar, and asked his other students to take him as their role model.

The young scholar did not simply content himself with traditional Islamic learning. Considering all knowledge to be beneficial and emanating from the Divine, and believing that "Islam is a religion of knowledge,"[2] the Sheikh continued to read widely on his own time. This has contributed to a broad-mindedness and sharp intellectual intuition, qualities that continue to feed his intellectual approach and positions as a Grand Mufti to this day.

Academia, therefore, was far from the final stage in Dr Ali's pursuit of Islamic Knowledge. Indeed, this journey took various forms, ranging from traveling, reading extensively, and being practically involved in daily life concerns, all of which won him exceptional trust and love from the masses. This represented an answer to his mother's oft-repeated *du'ā'* or prayer that Allah grant him the love of the people.

As respected as he was by the people, the Sheik was strongly loved and preferred by many of his teachers. Besides his foremost mentor Sheikh Abdullah bin Siddiq al-Ghumari, the towering scholar of hadith Sheikh Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghuda, also left a great impact on Sheik Ali's persona. Sheikh Ghuda, most notable for spreading a great deal of knowledge particularly that of the classical masters of Islamic disciplines, taught Sheik Ali *Usul ul Fiqh (Principles of Juristic Methodology*), by Imam Abul Nour Zuhair and Al Bukhari's *al- Adab al- Mufrad*, both of which Sheikh Ali fully

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2 "The Moral Ceiling of Intellectual Investigation" – article by Sheik Ali Gomaa published in Rose El–Yousef Magazine, Feb.23, 2008.

memorized. He received Ijazas from Sheikh Ghuda to teach both works.

Similarly, Dr. Ali spent a good deal of time studying with the author of the book he studied with Sheikh Ghuda, Sheikh Mohamed Abul Nour Al Zuhair, Professor of Juristic Methodology at the Sharī‘ah College, al-Azhar University and member of the Fatwa Council, widely recognized as one of the senior scholars of his time. He gave Sheikh Ali Gomaa the Ijaza to teach his great scholarly breakthrough *Usul ul Fiqh*, a comprehensive 4-volume work, and was the first to authorize the young Sheikh to issue Fatwas.

The dean of the College of Law and Sharī‘ah, Sheikh Jad Al Rabb, used to call Sheik Ali the Young Shafi‘ī (referring to Imam Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi‘ī, the founder of the Shafi‘ī school of Islamic Fiqh), given the young Sheik's keen interest in the books and researches of Imam Shafi‘ī. Sheikh Gad helped the young Sheik learn Shafi‘ī’s school of jurisprudence during his university studies, teaching him the central works of the school, such as Imam Al Suyouti's *Al-Ashbah Wal-Nadhaer*, which Dr. Ali showed exceptional talent in memorizing and comprehending.

The accomplished Sheikh Abdul Jalīl al- Qarnashawī al-Malikī, Professor of Islamic Fiqh and Law, had great love for Sheik Ali Gomaa. He was once quoted as saying “If I could, I would have given him the title of ‘’Professor’’ in teaching *'Sharh al Adad ‘ala Ibn al-Hajib'* (a thesis on juristic methodology), for his remarkable proficiency in explaining it to the class.” This compliment that was particularly heartwarming for the up and coming scholar who has always taken to heart such kind words and encouragement, particularly when coming from accomplished experts and teachers.

The personality that has had perhaps the greatest influence on the Grand Mufti’s career was Sheikh Jad Al Haqq Ali Jad Al Haqq, the former Grand Imam of al-Azhar. He left a palpable impact on Sheikh Ali's intellect and personality, as a result of the considerable span of time Dr. Ali spent accompanying and learning from him. Sheikh Jad Al Haqq had great respect and trust for Dr. Ali Gomaa and despite the latter’s relatively young age at the time, Imam Jad Al Haqq appointed Sheikh Ali as a member of the Fatwa Council of al-Azhar. He also appointed him as a researcher at the Islamic Research Academy, an opportunity which equipped the young Sheik with great experience and insights as a result of his attendance at the academy sessions and committee meetings and deliberations.

Also thanks to Imam Jad Al Haqq, Sheik Ali was sent on many travels throughout the world, attending key meetings and Islamic conferences, as a member of al-Azhar delegations. These were experiences that opened fresh horizons for Sheik Ali and enriched his scholarly and intellectual experience. As a result, Sheik Ali became one of the most notable al-Azhar figures, a well-deserved status which has been facilitated and made possible by the support of the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Sheikh Jad Al Haqq.

Dr. Ali also worked closely with Sheikh Al Zayat, often referred to as the Imam of the reading community of his age, and the Imam of Egypt at large. Under his supervision Dr. Ali worked through the great Shafi‘ī work “*Mughni al- Mohtaj Sharh al- Menhaj*” with acknowledged proficiency, as well as the complete legal works of the renowned Imam Shafi‘ī. Dr. Ali’s studies with the Sheikh would take place during his daily visits to the home of Sheikh Al Zayat after Dawn Prayers in the Darb Al Atrak district where al-Azhar Mosque is located.

Sheikh al-Husseini Youssuf al-Sheikh, Professor of Sharī‘ah and Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence at the College of

Sharī'ah and Law at al-Azhar University, who was well known as coming from a pious household, taught Dr. Ali during his studies at al-Azhar.

Mohamed Ismail al-Hamadany was one of the great Imams of his age and credited with authoring extremely valuable works commenting on al-Shātibī (the prominent malikī scholar). Under his supervision, Dr. Ali learned to master Arabic Grammar. Sheikh Hamadany used to describe Imam Ali as *al-Allama*, or the erudite scholar, a sign of his sincere love and regard for the young Sheik.

Sheik Ali also kept close company with Ahmed Mohamed Morsi al- Nakshabandī, one of the early students of Imam Mohamed Amin al- Baghdadī al-Nakshabandī, who came to Egypt in 1914 as a teacher and guide and stayed in the country till his death. Imam Ali remained in the companionship of Sheikh Ahmed Morsy for two consecutive years, meeting with him daily. This experience had a serious impact on Dr. Ali, who was greatly inspired by his fine ethics, knowledge, and approach, seeing in him a great embodiment of love, benevolence, beauty, and other great moral values that Sheik Ali genuinely appreciated.

Before becoming Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheik Ali served as Professor of Juristic Methodologies at al-Azhar University, an academic position that crowned a rich career path in academia and public service.

His previous experience as a mufti came as a result of his service as a member of the Azhar Fatwa Council between1995 and 2003. During this period, he was also appointed as General Supervisor for al-Azhar Mosque (2000-2003). Sheikh Ali has also been involved with the leading research institutions devoted to studying Islamic law, such as the Islamic Research Academy in Egypt, the Islamic Fiqh Council in India, the Fiqh Committee for Islamic Affairs, and the Fiqh

Council of North America. He has previously been a member of the International Fiqh Council affiliated with the Islamic World Organization in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

In more direct academic capacities, Dr. Ali served as Academic Advisor to the International Institute for Islamic Thought from 1992-2003, and as the Sharīʻah Supervisor of the Electronic Encyclopedia of Hadith of Al-Maknaz Islamic Association.

Sheikh Ali has also taken a great interest in economic and financial affairs in Egypt and beyond. He was the President of the Sharīʻah Advisory Board for the Middle East Bank during the period between 1997 and 2003. During the same period he was a member of the Sharīʻah Advisory Board for the Agricultural Development Bank, and President of the Board of Advisors of the Charitable Association for Cultural and Social Services. Before that, Dr. Ali served as the Vice President of Salih Abd Allah Kamil Center for Islamic Economy at al-Azhar University during the period between 1993 and 1996. He has also been a member of the Sharīʻah-based supervision committee of the International Islamic Bank for Investment and Development in Egypt since 1990.

As this list of career highlights indicates, Imam Ali is more than simply a religious leader or Mufti. He is an Islamic scholar of the highest order, a Muslim intellectual and a preacher who has challenged the classical image of Muslim theologians. His efforts to explain the noble teachings of Islam in a simple yet profound language have been palpable throughout the world, since he ventured into the world of Islamic academia and leadership.

It is in recognition of his contributions to knowledge, and his great efforts to promote intercultural understanding, that he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Liverpool Hope University in 2011. On this occasion, the Grand Mufti took the

opportunity to stress his appreciation for the mission of the University and the role that must be taken up by the world's religions to help towards building a better world, and saving us all from the excesses of materialism and greed.

At the critical juncture in time which Muslims are living, and amidst the clouds of confusion caused by the fast pace of development and globalization in all walks of life, the need for a moderate Muslim thinker of wisdom and knowledge to translate the ingenuous doctrine of Islam into modern terms, becomes only all the more pressing.

Dr. Ali's unique significance stems from the fact that he has studied secular sciences in addition to the complete of al-Azhar curriculum. He had been keen since his early youth to fully absorb the latter, and excelled in the various disciplines taught at the illustrious al-Azhar mosque. This, together with his wide-ranging experiences, extensive research, wide travels, companionship of great scholarly figures, and his high moral values, have been the reasons for him having been granted a unique following, love and respect among people, both domestically and worldwide.

Being a devoted researcher who holds a great passion for knowledge, coupled with his earnest intention to serve humanity, Dr Ali was set on a life-long journey in pursuit of knowledge for the service of people. This follows the footsteps of the great Prophet of Islam, Muhammad (Peace be upon him) who said "Seek knowledge even unto China."[3]

Additionally, being an honest propagator of a balanced approach in his scholarly and intellectual journey, Dr. Ali has struck a remarkable harmony between the Islamic heritage and orthodox schools of thought on the one hand, and modernity

3 Noble Hadith narrated by Anas Ibn Malek

and contemporary issues affecting Islam and Muslims on the other. He has thereby succeeded in integrating the noble teachings of Islam into our contemporary day life, effectively earning him a place among prominent scholars of his time at quite an early age.

Dr. Gomaa is also a prolific author who produced many notable works, mostly related to Islamic disciplines, but also touching on a wide range of interests in the various human sciences.[4]

The eminent Sheikh has demonstrated supreme aptitude in acquiring Islamic knowledge and an equally impressive talent and capacity to impart it unto people. This latter has been accomplished with great wisdom and through many mediums, all the while maintain strict standards of research methodology that insist on preserving the quality of the Islamic scholarly production, while encouraging and making room for Ijtihād[5].

Committing himself to the weighty responsibility of safeguarding the Islamic legacy, Dr. Ali never ceases to proffer fresh insights into Islam's precise teachings, in a way that has made his message reach a broad swath of people.

Dr. Ali is credited with his help in renewing religious discourse across the Muslim world, at a time when Muslims need to be reminded of their rich heritage and identity, so that they may become, once again, both proud and progressive. He has offered a fresh reading of Islamic disciplines, without compromising its fundamentals as clearly stated in the Quran and Sunnah.

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4 For a detailed list of his contributions, see the following chapter "Intellectual Output"

5 Independent reasoning.

Because he started his preaching at such an early age, Dr. Ali has had the opportunity to gain special insights into the troubles afflicting the Muslim community. And as time passed by, he grew more comprehensive of all sorts of modern challenges facing people, ranging from worship and ritual practices to daily- life matters, not to mention the prevalent misconceptions and faulty interpretations of the Quran and Sunnah made by self claimed scholars.

In the 1990s, Dr. Ali revived the tradition of public ***dars***[6], holding almost daily religious circles at al-Azhar mosque, teaching jurisprudence, juristic methodology, Hadith sciences, theology, and spirituality. For a decade Sheikh Ali could be found in one of the alcoves of al-Azhar mosque, giving lessons that started shortly after dawn prayer and continued until noon. The eminent Sheikh was selected in 1998 to become the orator of the famed Sultan Hassan Mosque, one of Cairo's oldest and most beautiful landmarks of the Mamluk[7] Heritage. His lectures captured a large number of worshipers who flocked the mosque to listen to the Sheikh's sermons, which revived the noble teachings of Islam, presenting it in a context fitting the contemporary milieu.

His Friday sermons, which drew a huge number of Cairenes from all walks of life, were usually followed by question and answer sessions, where people asked him about issues pertaining to their daily life and ways to keep their spiritual bond with God intact.

In addition to these traditional roles, the Grand Mufti has taken advantage of the pervasiveness of media in the lives of people today, appearing regularly on television to answer questions

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6 Lesson
7 Dynasty that ruled Egypt from the mid-13th century till the early 16$^{th}$ century.

posed by people from all walks of life, and offer simplified explanations of the Sharīʻah .

Dr. Ali has also used the print media for preaching, publishing a weekly column in the Egyptian daily newspaper al-Ahram, where he tackled a wide array of subjects ranging from explanations of the basics of Islamic law, discussing current events and offering religious insights in a way that would strengthen people's faith and integrate the fine teachings of Islam into daily life providing pragmatic guidance, with all its strenuous complexities.

In terms of his methodological orientation, even though Dr Ali is believed to have a special inclination towards the Shafiʻī school of thought, he generally follows the Sunni path, successfully mediating all schools of thought, and deriving benefit from each, while presenting his own input that demonstrates his balanced approach. This approach, though nurtured by a comprehensive understanding of classical text books, is rooted in the urgent need to relate Islamic teachings with the present time.

The most notable characteristic of Dr. Gomaa's personality lies in his insistence on challenging the misconception that people should adhere to one trend of thought, and that they should either submit to, for example, a mystical way of living, or one which pays more strict attention to laws. According to the revered Imam, spirituality and Islamic Jurisprudence are two sides of one coin, two intertwined aspects of a single worldview which represents the way to God. This explains his middle-of-the-road approach in addressing any matter, providing, in his own words, "practical and relevant guidance

while at the same time staying true to its foundational principles”[8].

Anyone who is attentive to the Grand Mufti in any of his forums will quickly come to appreciate the uniqueness of his approach and methodology, whether in delivering a public lecture, among Islamic circles, in his writings, or in the Fatwas he issues. This is an approach of which the world is in dire need given the great challenges it faces.

Widely viewed as one of the most respected jurists in the Sunni Muslim world, Dr. Ali had always sought to draw solutions to the most intricate problems of our modern age from within the Islamic doctrine, asserting the universality of Islam, which, in the Sheikh's own words, “is capable of crossing through the times, places, and the diverse cultures and natures of people's communities”.

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8 “Islam and Modernity”– a speech given by Dr. Ali Gomaa at Lancaster House, London, U.K.– June 4, 2007

# Chapter 2: As a Jurist

The Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr. Sheikh Ali Gomaa, is one of the leading Islamic scholars of his time. As a member of a family renowned for its piety and learning, the Grand Mufti imbibed both a love for knowledge and a concern for social justice at an early age.

Given his broad education in both the Islamic and secular sciences, along with his voracious appetite for reading and studying, his extensive travels, and his experiences interacting with people from all walks of life and from all regions of the world, it is unsurprising that Sheikh Ali should put on offer a number of innovative contributions in the fields that represent his primary specialty, Islamic jurisprudence and juristic methodology.

## Intellectual Orientations

Sheikh Ali has long maintained that Islam arrived in the world to answer three fundamental existential questions: Where did we come from? What are we doing here? And what will become of us tomorrow? In other words, according to Dr. Gomaa, Islam concerns itself equally with the past, present and future, providing answers to the perennial questions of humanity independent of the vagaries of time and chronology.

This basic position underlies Dr. Gomaa’s approach to the intellectual heritage of Islam, and the legacy of Muslim civilizational culture. The task of the contemporary Muslim jurist, then, is to cultivate a deep appreciation for the Islamic heritage, a legacy that finds its inspiration in the Qur’an and the Prophetic example, and its content in the vast textual corpus of the Islamic legacy. These textual sources have formed the basis for a civilization that has spawned

innumerable achievements – scientific, artistic, and humanitarian. One must begin with a proper understanding of the legacy of Muslim civilization, and its towering position within human history, to address the needs and issues facing the world today.

Sheikh Ali's basic approach to the juristic tradition is one of reverence and judicious selectivity. He maintains that the corpus of texts from the world of Islamic thought that have long been considered authoritative are guides for us in the present day in as much as they lay out a methodology for interpreting the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions. This, however, does not bind today's Muslims to the specific substantive outcomes arrived at by previous scholars. Rather, the spirit of Islam demands new engagements and readings which render the religion relevant to the particularities of living in a modern world. The Mufti has long insisted on drawing a distinction between the essential, transcendent truths of Islam, and its contingent worldly manifestations. This is the sacred task of the Islamic jurist. With one eye towards the heritage of Islamic thinking and philosophy, and another focused on the realities of today's rapidly changing world, the jurist must mediate between the absolute and the contingent in a way that does justice to both.

These are, of course, weighty issues, and it is in view of their seriousness that Islamic societies have been restrictive in their granting of authoritative religious leadership to only those with the highest qualifications in both learning and piety. Experience has shown repeatedly that unqualified commentators fail to maintain the balance that is so definitive of the Islamic juristic culture, often leading to extremes, including violent radicalism of the sort that has so preoccupied the global community in recent years.

The urgency of this balanced orientation is no doubt what has led to its growing popularity among a wide range of Muslim

thinkers, to the point where it can now be considered a full-fledged school of thought, inspiring a culture of learning, rationality and fair-mindedness essential to remaining faithful to the tradition of Islam. The intellectual preoccupations and experiences of the Grand Mufti thus serve as a model for adherents of this school, and so we now turn to them.

**Flexibility**

The Grand Mufti has always insisted on the highest academic and scholarly standards in the service of humanity. His keen legal mind compels him to draw precise distinctions pertinent to the appropriate application of Islamic law, where some scholars are content to blur fundamental tenets with subsidiary matters. Holding fast to the priorities of the global Muslim community, Dr. Gomaa has been a vocal advocate for distinguishing between source texts and their interpretations, methodological principles and contingent rulings, the permanent and the ephemeral, and the transcendent and the contingent. Rulings, the Grand Mufti maintains, are subject to evolution and development as a result of social change, differences in social customs, the spirit of the time, and geographical specificity.

This flexibility is an integral part of the Islamic legal tradition – in deed; one might say it is one of the defining characteristics of Islamic law. Islamic law is, according to Dr. Ali, both a methodology and the collection of positions adopted by Muslim jurists over the last 1,400 years. Those centuries were witness to a remarkable intellectual diversity – no less than 90 schools of legal thought – and the twenty-first century finds us in the providential position of being able to look back on this tradition in order to find that which will benefit us today. This is one of the first steps in arriving at a legal opinion.

For Sheikh Ali, Islamic law is in fact one of the most important institutions in the endeavor to properly understand the relationship between Islam and the contemporary world. In an attempt to provide Muslims with authoritative guidance about their religion, jurists look not only to the vast legal tradition, but must also conduct a proper examination of the lived reality of Muslims, in order to provide them with relevant rulings. In effect, Islamic law represents the bridge between the long-standing intellectual-legal tradition of Islam and the contemporary world in which we live. They are the link between the past and the present, the absolute and the relative, the transcendent and the contingent, the theoretical and the practical. For this reason it takes more than just knowledge of the classical texts of Islamic law to issue a relevant and balanced opinion. Competent jurists are required to have an in-depth understanding of the world in which they are living and the problems that their communities are facing.

In view of this emphasis on lived reality as an integral component of the juristic process, the Sheikh has outlined in detail the different types of considerations that must be taken account to capture an accurate portrait of this reality. The first part of reality is the realm of things which includes inanimate objects, as well as animals. The second is the realm of persons. In today's context, this includes natural persons, that is to say human beings who have a rational faculty, a soul, individual responsibility, and a reckoning before God; as well as "conventional persons," which is a term used to refer these days in particular to corporations to indicate their legal independence from the individuals who administer them. The third realm is that of events and happenings which occur around us. These include economic events, such as the fluctuations in the value of a currency; political events, such as the decision to start a war; military events, such as an occupation of some land; or everyday happenings, such as the going-on of a conference in which participants are discussing some issue. Each of these occurs in some context: at some

particular time, in some particular place, under some particular circumstances, and involving certain people. Each event, then, is a compound phenomenon, comprising all of these contextual elements, all of which must be studied by the jurist. The fourth realm of reality is the realm of ideas, including all of the comprehensive worldviews and individual points of view that circulate in the world.

According to Sheikh Ali, all four of these realms must be taken into account in order to arrive at a sensible opinion. More to the point, the jurist must remain sensitive to the various ways in which these components interact and the particular configurations they occupy in the case under consideration. It is clear, therefore, that the responsible jurist must be a figure who is in touch with the world, and responsive to the changes and developments it constantly undergoes.

Here is where we begin to understand the extreme significance of ensuring only the most qualified and erudite are considered competent to issue opinions. Dr. Ali has long been outspoken with regard to the disastrous ramifications of allowing unqualified personalities to speak in authoritative ways about Islamic law. When those who lack these qualifications issue fatwas en masse and with no regard to context, the result is the extremism we see today. For Dr. Ali, when each and every person's unqualified opinion is considered authoritative we lose a tool which is of the utmost importance to reign in extremism and preserve balanced understandings of Islam. We may point to any number of declarations posing as fatwas from extremists and terrorists as examples of how grave the consequences are of not following the historical Islamic example of differentiating between those with scholarly standing and authority, and those without. The Muslim world has been particularly successful at creating institutions and bodies whose long-standing service to the community confer upon them legitimacy that cannot be obtained simply by

someone with access to modern media. According to Dr. Ali, this is no time to abandon that example.

The flexibility emphasized by Dr. Ali Gomaa is not a new phenomenon. In fact, he believes it is has always been an in-built part of the Islamic legal tradition, and especially the fatwa-giving process. Scholars have long argued that fatwas are available to being modified and updated as a result of changing circumstances (*ahwal*), the flow of history (*zaman*), the reality of geographical diversity (*makan*), and different peoples (*ashkhas*). To demonstrate this, he points to the example of Malik b. Anas, one of the most famous personalities in Islamic history and the leading scholar of Medina in the second Islamic century. Imam Malik is well-known for his adamant defense of the right to free thought, even in the face of persecution. However, when he was approached by the Caliph of the time with a proposal to make his entire dominion subject to the rulings in Malik's famous *Muwatta'* (a famous book on Jurisprudence), Malik refused, saying "Leave the people of each locality to themselves and what they have chosen." Through this simple statement, Imam Malik set a precedent of intellectual and legal diversity in the Islamic world which paved the way for individual communities to adapt Islamic law to their own circumstances. This is the basic intellectual commitment that led to a vibrant culture of scholarship and tolerance throughout the centuries, and it is the one to which Sheikh Ali adheres today.

## The Objectives of the Sharī'ah

Another position that has characterized the Sheikh's approach to jurisprudence is his insistence that all rulings, in all their variety and range, all aim at serving the basic objectives of the Sharī'ah (*maqasid al-Sharī'ah)* which have long been recognized by scholars of juristic methodology. These scholars

have long maintained that a deep study of the rulings of the Sharīʻah will lead us to five central values that the Sharīʻah was revealed to protect: life, mind, reason, religion, honor, and wealth.

To arrive at these values, Sheikh Ali points out it is important to note that one of the fundamental concepts in jurisprudence is that of the legal cause (*ʻilla*). Jurists regularly consider the legal cause in order to be able to extend their rulings to others. In considering a given ruling, then, one can enquire as to the principle (*asl*) that underlines this ruling (*hukm*). In other words, what is the reasoning behind a given ruling? When we probe deeply into the series of causes, we will eventually find ourselves at a list of interests that the given rulings are thought to promote. These may be either explicit in the foundational texts or implicit and arrived at through the intellectual exertion of a jurist. The ultimate list of Objectives that will be arrived at, according to the jurists, are the five we have listed above. As the fundamental values of the Sharīʻah, they are to be given priority over other considerations.

Let us consider an example. Wine is considered forbidden. So, we may enquire as to why has God prohibited wine. The response from the jurists is because it is an intoxicant. Then, it may be asked, why intoxicants are prohibited by God. The response is because it compromises reason. The next question is why is it forbidden to compromise one's rational faculty. Indeed, the rational faculty is regularly rendered entirely absent when one sleeps. The answer to this is because God has rendered it responsible for our actions, and the mind/reason is the locus of responsibility. Therefore, compromising one's rational faculty unnecessarily is prohibited. The case of sleep is an exception due to unavoidable human necessity. This is a simple example. However, when one repeats this process on all the rulings of the Sharīʻah, he arrives at a common ground which we know as the Objectives of the Sharīʻah.

Among the contributions of Dr. Ali to the theory of Maqasid al-Sharīʻah is his translation of two of the values into terms that better reflect the terminology of the contemporary world. First, protection of honor (in some cases, it is referred to as protection of progeny) is bettered rendered in modern language, according to Dr. Ali, as human dignity, for "honor corresponds to the concept of human dignity in their jargon." This precludes by necessity torture and cruel punishment. Secondly, Dr. Ali prefers "protection of private property" to "protection of wealth" because the former is a more inclusive term, accounting for intellectual property as well as tangible goods and real estate.

As well, Dr. Ali has suggested an order of priority to these values which better reflect their importance in the Islamic worldview. The highest priority is accorded to "protection of life" because it is humans who are the very locus of Sharīʻah. If one forfeits life, all the other values are necessarily forfeited. Therefore, it takes priority. The second-highest value is "protection of mind" because, as we have seen, the rational faculty is the locus of all obligation and responsibility which defines the Sharīʻah. This protection occurs on both the individual level and the communal level. For the former, we have seen the case of the prohibition of intoxicants. For the latter, however, there is a positive duty on society to provide education towards the end of building communities and civilizations. Third is "protection of religion" which seeks to preserve sacredness in mundane life. This value applies not only to Islam, but to all religions, indicating the strong Islamic commitment to freedom of religion. The fourth rank of priority belongs to "protection of human dignity" which guarantees individuals' rights to basic freedoms, such as freedom of opinion, freedom of belief, and the freedom to travel freely. Finally, we have "protection of private property."

This formulation, according to Dr. Ali, seeks to advance public order and justice, for these five protections represent values agreed upon by all civilizations and legal codes.

## Legal Diversity

Legal diversity has been a feature of Islam since the very beginning. Among the Companions of the Prophet themselves, there were many recognized mujtahids. Consider the case of the Prophet's wife, Aisha, who disagreed with many other Companions on some issues. Among these is her opinion that the cloth that was used to cover the Ka'ba may be sold in order to fund the upkeep and maintenance of the Sacred Mosque.

Among successive generations, too, we find many great mujtahids. Each of these had their own principles guiding their interaction with the foundational texts of the Qur'an and Sunna. These led to divergences which over the course of centuries have led to a great treasure of intellectual and juristic approaches and opinions.

This state of affairs led to the question of how later generations ought now to decide between the various, often conflicting, opinions. Dr. Ali has explained that in the case of a jurist who has not reached the status of a mujtahid, he must choose one based on a due regard for the Objectives of the Sharīʿah, so that he may take account of the interests of the people in the particular contexts in which they find themselves. As for the case of a jurist who has achieved the rank of a mujtahid, he is to perform his own ijtihad, looking to the findings of another only as a reference and a source for corroboration.

As for Dr. Ali himself, he follows the example of the institution of the Dār al-Iftā'. The Dār al-Iftā' began as a Hanafī institution, issuing fatwas on its dominant opinions, in accordance with the orientation of the Ottoman Empire.

However, during the leadership of Muhammad Abduh, this was expanded so as to resort to Malikī opinions in particular cases in which it was not feasible to act upon the Hanafī position. Later, this was further expanded by Sheikh Muhammad Faraj Sanhurī who facilitated and encouraged making reference to eight different schools of jurisprudence, including some Shi'īte schools.

Similarly, despite Dr. Ali's special affinity for the Shafi'ī school, he feels it is appropriate to make reference to other Sunni schools in an effort to facilitate matters for the people, and arrive at the most appropriate rulings. He successfully mediates all schools of thought, deriving benefit from each, while presenting his own input that demonstrates his balanced approach. This approach, though nurtured by comprehensive understanding of classical text books, is rooted in the need to relate Islamic ethos to our lived reality.

Basing himself on these commitments, the Grand Mufti has produced an impressive body of work, including the publication of several scholarly books, consultative positions on some of the highest bodies of Islamic legal research in the world, appointments to the editorial board of a number of scientific journals and encyclopedias, mentorship to emerging scholars and researchers, and an engagement with the public worthy of a scholar and public intellectual of the highest caliber.

Dr. Gomaa has been a prolific writer from his earliest days as a law professor. In an effort to facilitate access to, and maintain interest in, the classical tradition of Islamic thought and especially Islamic law, he has for years taken a great interest in producing editions of some of the most famous works of Islamic law, jurisprudence and theology. An important example is the Sheikh's position as general editor of the Encyclopedia of Hadith, an ambitious project sponsored by the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation to make the Prophetic

traditions more accessible by making them available on CD-Rom, facilitating cross-references and links immensely.

In addition, the Grand Mufti has published monographs of his own on a variety of topics related to Islamic jurisprudence. These books demonstrate the Sheikh's range, and his ability to speak to a variety of different audiences. From simple *fatwa*s for the everyday Muslim, to introductions to the discipline for beginning students and sophisticated treatises on technical points of legal interpretation, the Sheik's output in his field of specialization is remarkable for not only its breadth, but also its attention to detail.

In his role as a mufti, Dr. Gomaa has produced a number of volumes addressing specific problems posed to him by Muslims around the world. The most recent example of this is the two-volume series *al-Bayan*, which answers questions of particular relevance to present-day matters. Topics range from central creedal beliefs regarding God and His Prophet, to subsidiary matters of dress and the permissibility of music, providing an easy reference for Muslims around the world when they encounter frequent questions.

The Sheikh's belief is that jurists must engage with concerns that dominate the minds of contemporary Muslims in an increasingly globalized society have led him to write on two matters that are often at the root of misunderstanding between Islam and the Western world. A staunch proponent of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue, the Grand Mufti wrote an important work on the history of Jihad in Islam. This concept, oft-quoted and little understood, was subjected to a rigorous treatment by Dr. Gomaa. In this book, he clearly marks out its religious significance and history.

Equally relevant to modern perceptions of Islam, and indeed of pressing concern to the Muslim community, are issues surrounding women. In order to address recurring question,

the Grand Mufti has published a book of *Fatwas for Women*, as well as a wide-ranging overview of the status of Women in Islamic Civilization. In these works, he addresses common questions about such controversial topics as polygyny, spousal abuse, female leadership, the testimony of women in court, and a woman's inheritance. These are all issues that have been used to cast doubt on the ability of Islamic law to adapt to modern life.

The Sheikh's engagement with the public as a jurist is, of course, not limited to giving written *fatwa*s. Even before his appointment to the position of Grand Mufti, Dr. Gomaa had become a well-known and beloved personality as a result of his question-and-answer sessions and public lectures in the mosques around Cairo. More recently, however, his interest in using the media to make himself available to a wider swath of the Egyptian and Muslim community has turned him into a veritable public intellectual. Today, the Mufti appears regularly on television to interact with his constituency by answering questions, offering commentaries and lessons, and contributing opinions and editorials to newspapers in the Middle East, Europe and the United States, on matters of social significance, such as the imperative to care for the environment, and the illegitimacy of terrorism. His book *Salient Features of the Times* is, for example, a collection of the Mufti's columns in al-Ahram spanning a range of topics of public interest. Similarly, *Contemporary Fatwas from the Grand Mufti* is a selected transcript of the Sheikh's question-and-answer sessions on an Egyptian talk show.

For beginning students, the Sheikh has produced an impressive array of works to introduce them to the religious sciences, and in particular his specialty, Islamic jurisprudence and juristic methodology. Maintaining that the Islamic heritage needs to be learned anew by a wider segment of the population, and not just Islamic scholars, Dr. Gomaa has sought to revive the Islamic legacy in an idiom that is both comprehensible and

inspiring to budding researchers. In particular, his work *Towards the Islamic Heritage* is an outgrowth of a lecture series delivered to students in the humanities and social sciences in the hope of giving them the tools to work with the central texts of the Islamic tradition. In addition to this, the Grand Mufti has produced a number of works in his discipline of specialization. *The Discipline of Islamic Legal Theory and its Relationship to Islamic Philosophy* explains the centrality of law and legal reasoning to the Islamic worldview. *The Tools of Ijtihad* is a detailed explanation of the traditional mechanisms of deriving rulings from sacred texts, with an eye towards understanding how this process may be legitimately revived within the context of a modern world. In *An Introduction to Studying the Schools of Jurisprudence*, the Sheikh undertakes a historical discussion of the various Islamic schools of law, and the specificities of each tradition, in an effort to aid the student to navigate complicated texts and manuscripts.

For their part, those who are already specialists and experts in Islamic law will find extended treatments by the Grand Mufti on all manner of questions of Islamic law. These are often sophisticated philosophical discussions discussing the epistemological status of rival arguments, the hermeneutics of scriptural interpretation, the methods of reconciling contradictory evidences, or the question of what constitutes binding proofs like consensus or analogy.

Dr. Ali Gomaa has long been recognized by his peers and contemporaries as a path-breaking jurist whose concern for everyday people guides his approach to Islamic jurisprudence and juristic methodology. His innovative approach has gained many adherents, and represents a strong hope for the future, and the ability of Islamic law to remain responsive to the needs of the present and future, a desideratum long recognized by Islamic jurists throughout history, and in severe demand in today’s world.

## Chapter 3: As Grand Mufti

Among Sheikh Ali Gomaa's diverse facets, his association with the delivery of fatwas ranks perhaps foremost in the popular imagination. Sheikh Ali was already a renowned professor of Islamic Legal Theory at Al-Azhar University and a charismatic preacher at Cairo's Sultan Hasan Mosque before being appointed Head of Dār al-Iftā' (The House of the Fatwa) in 2003. Despite the multiplicity of roles embodied by Egypt's current Grand Mufti – the jurist, the spiritual guide, the public intellectual -, his leadership of Dār al-Iftā' for almost a decade now has consolidated his image primarily as that of a scholar to whom one may turn in order to obtain an authoritative opinion in matters pertaining to Islamic Law. Throughout the 2000s Sheikh Ali Gomaa has in turn contributed to transform the perception (until then common in the minds of some of his contemporaries) of the mufti as a scholar preoccupied with form instead of content, and of the fatwa as an instrument detached from spirituality. Arguably the first Grand Mufti with an additional training in secular sciences (economics and business administration), as well as a familiarity with the English language, Sheikh Ali Gomaa has made use of these assets to impact on and transform the institution of Dār al-Iftā'.

Sheikh Ali Gomaa's experience in dealing with the fatwa is in fact a long-standing one. Sheikh Ali has been a scholar at the Fatwa Commission (*Lajnat al-Fatwa*) of Al-Azhar (1995-2003), a member of the Cairo-based Islamic Research Academy (*Majma' al-Buhūth al-Islamiyya*) since 2004, a regular participant in the meetings of the Organization of the Islamic Conference's International Islamic Fiqh Academy and those of the Islamic Fiqh Academy of the Muslim World League (both in Saudi Arabia), as well as an advisor to the Fiqh Council of North America and the Islamic Fiqh Academy

in India. Sheikh Ali’s accumulated experience in answering questions in a variety of formats (newspaper columns, television talk shows and others) is also reflected in a number of publications issued over the last years: the two-volume series *al-Bayān* answers questions on topics ranging from central creedal beliefs regarding God and His Prophet, to subsidiary matters of dress and the permissibility of music; a collection of fatwas on women’s questions; the publication of *Al-Fatawa al-‘Asriyyah li Muftī al-Diyār al-Misriyyah* (Contemporary Fatwas from the Grand Mufti), a selected transcript of the Sheikh’s question-and-answer sessions on the prominent Egyptian talk show Al-Bayt Baytak; *Al-Kalim al-Tayyib* (The Good Words) covering a wide spectrum of issues pertaining to the daily life of Muslims; a three-volume compendium of collective fatwas issued by Al Ragehy Banking firm; a practical manual on the pilgrimage to Mecca containing fatwas on this ritual (*Taysir al-Nahj fi Sharh Manasik al-Hajj*); as well as two books outlining in detail the etiquette of seeking a fatwa (*Adab al-Mustaftī*) and the conditions required for producing one (*Sinā‘at al*-Iftā’). This prolific body of work dealing with practical applications of shari‘a should be seen in conjunction with Sheikh Ali Gomaa’s in-depth study of Islamic legal theory – a study that has resulted in the production of books on personal interpretation (*ijtihād*), consensus (*ijmā‘*), analogy (*qiyās*), and other crucial mechanisms and principles of Islamic Law.

The fatwa has become for Sheikh Ali Gomaa perhaps the single most important instrument for disseminating his vision of Islam as a moderate and tolerant religion suitable for all times and places. Sheikh Ali Gomaa has devoted a considerable amount of his time not only answering questions from petitioners across the globe, but also theorizing about the nature and function of the fatwa in the modern world. Sheikh Ali Gomaa’s interest in the fatwa seems to stem from its specific mode of articulating the theoretical and the practical sides of Islamic Law; its balance between the absolute and the

relative; and the equilibrium it establishes between the permanent and the ever-changing. The articulations between these concepts lie of course at the very heart of what it means to be a Muslim in the 21st century.

Sheikh Ali Gomaa defines the fatwa as “the elucidation of a Shari‘ah ruling concerning an occurrence in the world”. Ultimately, Sheikh Ali points out, only God issues fatwas – others simply transmit His rulings. In order to perform the duties of a mufti, one must be Muslim, sane, mature, knowledgeable, specialized, and just. One must have also attained the scholarly status of “*mujtahid*,” which characterizes those possessing advanced ability in independent legal reasoning. According to the Grand Mufti, there is a consensus among scholars that being male is not a condition for issuing fatwas.

The Grand Mufti stresses also that a question requiring a fatwa should in principle be submitted in written form and free of ambiguity. In his answer the mufti should in turn provide the evidence that underlies the opinion and avoid asserting that his particular fatwa represents God’s ruling. Sheikh Ali Gomaa has theorized the production of the fatwa as divided into four stages.

### 1. Conceptualization (*al-Taşwīr*)

This process involves the Mufti conceptualizing the case that is being presented by the person asking the question, having an inquiry, or seeking a fatwa. While the responsibility of a precise conceptualization process falls primarily on the shoulder of the person submitting the question, it’s the duty of the mufti to extract as many details and information pertinent to the case discussed by the questioner, particularly aspects of time, people, place and conditions, the change of which may impact decisively upon the fatwa.

**2. The Stage of Designation (*al-Takyīf*)**

In this stage the mufti relates the case under discussion to pertinent issues of jurisprudence.

**3. The Stage of Elucidating the Ruling (*bayān al-hukm*)**

Here the Mufti extracts the ruling based on his examination of the four principal legislative sources of Islamic law, i.e. the Qur'an, the Sunnah, Consensus of the Companions (*Ijma' al-şahāba*), and Analogical Deduction.

**4. The stage of Application (*al- Iftā'*):**

At this point the Mufti arrives at the reality that has been perceived, ensuring that the Fatwa extracted does not contradict higher objectives of Islamic Sharī'ah (*maqāşid al-Sharī'ah*), an agreed upon consensus or an established legal maxim.

For Sheik Ali Gomaa, then, the fatwa is based upon a hierarchy of evidence that starts with the Qur'an, then the Sunnah, followed by analogy (*qiyās*). Fatwas must not contradict the consensus (*ijmā'*) of the Muslim scholars. They may be based on disputed principles such as juristic preference (*istihsān*) or the laws of previous communities only in cases of disagreement. Sheikh Ali Gomaa commonly relies on the recognized schools of Islamic jurisprudence, unless his own ijtihad leads him to believe that the truth lies elsewhere.9 The institution he heads – Dār al-Iftā' – also takes into consideration the juristic schools of non-Sunni Islam (Ja'farī, Zaydī, Ibādī and Zāhirī) and studies the opinions of major mujtahids from the Islamic legal tradition such as al-Awzā 'ī, al-Tabarī, al-Layth ibn Sa'd, and others.

9 Ali Gomaa, The Craft of Issuing A Fatwa, in Responding from Tradition.

Sheikh Ali Gomaa has paid particular attention to the articulation between the text and the reality. He has emphasized the need to have a firm grasp of the lived reality in order to issue fatwas that may be relevant for the lives of contemporary Muslims. Taking note of the complexity of the modern world, Sheikh Ali Gomaa has instituted a number of protocols, agreements and exchange programs with a range of other institutions. Under his leadership Dār al-Iftā' has cooperated with and benefitted from the scientific expertise of the Egyptian National Research Center, the University of Ayn Shams in Cairo, the Central Bank of Egypt, the Egyptian Ministry for Family Population and other bodies both at the national and international levels. Dār al-Iftā' also relies on an expansive network of experts and consultants in order to produce fatwas concerning matters outside of Egypt and the Middle East. The religious and secular expertise of Sheikh Ali Gomaa – trained in Islamic sciences as well as commerce – has undoubtedly facilitated this mode of cooperation between Dār al-Iftā' and secular institutions. This cooperation has in turn further enhanced the authority of the religious opinions issued by the Grand Mufti.

The Grand Mufti has also written extensively about the conditions required for changing the fatwa. Fatwas, as is well-known, change according to their time, place, people, and circumstances. Sheikh Ali Gomaa distinguishes between fatwas based on definite texts and those which rely on local practices. Fatwas based on local customs are particularly prone to transformation. According to Sheikh Ali, if customs were to remain unchanged for a number of centuries, nobody would be able to change the fatwa concerning them. The fatwas based on definite texts, by contrast, are universal in the commands and prohibitions. Examples of the latter include obligations to pray, to fast, to pay alms (*zakāt*), and to be honest and

trustworthy, as well as the permissibility of commerce, the prohibitions of fornication and the consumption of alcohol.[10]

The methodology used by Sheikh Ali Gomaa when issuing fatwas is geared towards ending acrimonious debates amongst Muslims, notably by showing how the Islamic tradition provides a "framework within which Muslims may disagree on details while uniting on overarching values". In order to foster this unity, Sheikh Ali has issued his fatwas according to three principles: "The first principle stipulates that matters may be denounced only when the entire community is in agreement; matters concerning which there is a variance of opinion should not be condemned. The second principle holds that the position of one school may not be invalidated by the position of another school. The third principle assures that a legal reasoning (*ijtihād*) is not invalidated by an alternate *ijtihād*. The adoption of these principles, Sheikh Ali hopes, will bring harmony to the Muslim community despite the natural and unavoidable differences between its members".[11]

### Dār al-Iftā'

Sheik Ali Gomaa's greatest contribution to the illustrious history of Egyptian Grand Muftis lies perhaps in his restructuring of the office itself. Upon his nomination to the post of Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Ali Gomaa characteristically gave a lot of thought to Dār al-Iftā' as an administrative body. Drawing on his previous studies in business and management, Sheikh Ali made sure he used the insights from these disciplines, making them relevant to the particular institution that is Dār al-Iftā'.

Sheikh Ali's method consisted of the following: First, a thorough study of the history of the institution, paying

10 Ali Gomaa, The Craft of Issuing A Fatwa, in Responding from Tradition.
11 Translators' Introduction to Ali Gomaa, Responding from Tradition.

particular attention to its pinnacle or golden age, in order to examine the causes and conditions necessary for its prosperity. At the same time, however, the Sheikh carefully considered the new possibilities offered by the present age, and how those possibilities – including innovative technological means – might be mobilized productively in the case at hand, based on the proven idea that institutions must constantly adapt and adjust to the real world if they are to remain dynamic. An institution that does not transform itself is doomed to fail.

Although the Egyptian Dār al-Iftā’ was only formally established at the end of the 19th century, Sheikh Ali Gomaa studied the history of fatwa-giving in Egypt over the past 700 years. In the course of his readings Sheikh Ali found that the pinnacle of institutionalized fatwa-giving in Egypt occurred during the time of Muhammad Al-Mahdi Al-‘Abbasi at the end of the $19^{th}$ century. Al-Mahdi Al-‘Abbasi was the son of the deputy of Ibrahim Pasha and a promising scholar in his time. Appointed mufti at the age of only 21, Muhammad al-Mahdi al-‘Abbasi recognized the huge responsibility accrued to him and acted consequently. He decided to turn the office of the Mufti into a full-fledged institution, which he strove to keep away from the power of the state. Aware of his own limited experience in world affairs, Al-Mahdi Al-‘Abbasi relied on the best scholars of his time in order to produce fatwas. Unfortunately, the example he set had been almost forgotten over the subsequent hundred years. Sheik Ali Gomaa set out to reestablish Dār al-Iftā’ collegiality and independence from the state – the two hallmarks that according to Sheik Ali characterized institutionalized fatwas under the authority of Al-Mahdi Al-‘Abbasi. During his tenure, Sheik Ali Gomaa successfully managed to institutionally separate Dār al-Iftā’ from the Ministry of Justice, achieving one of his long-time goals of making the fatwa body independent in its budget and administration in 2007.

The changes operated by Sheik Ali Gomaa have been dubbed a revolution in the production of fatwas. The Grand Mufti has truly institutionalized the delivery of religious opinions within Dār al-Iftā', instituting a system of checks and balances that has transformed the delivery of authoritative religious opinions in Egypt. Sheik Ali Gomaa established for this purpose a research center (the department of Sharī'ah studies), a collegial fatwa commission (*amānat al-fatwa*), a translation department, a call center, a functional website, a media and public relations center, and a periodical academic publication (*the majalla Dār al-Iftā' al-Misriyya*). Published quarterly since July 2009, the journal of Dār al-Iftā' publishes state of the art scholarship in Islamic Law, offering professors of Sharī'ah across Egypt an almost unique opportunity to publish their researches in a peer-reviewed journal. These research papers then naturally feed the process of fatwa-giving, providing the in-depth background information required for fulfilling the primary task of Dār al-Iftā'. The journal – as Sheik Ali Gomaa wrote in the editorial to the first issue – reflects the glorified status of knowledge in Islam. Recent articles have dealt with both theoretical and practical issues, including invalid contracts in non-Muslim territories, the use of religious endowments for funding educational and research projects, the rights of street children, differences of opinion in the use of analogy, and translations of the meanings of the Holy Qur'ān.

Under the guidance of Sheik Ali Gomaa the Egyptian Dār al-Iftā' has truly acquired an international dimension. In 2010 and 2011, the number of fatwas delivered to questions coming from abroad numbered 10,346 – over 14 each day.[12] Fatwas at Dār al-Iftā' are currently issued in nine different languages: Arabic, English, French, German, Malay, Urdu, Turkish, Russian and Indonesian. In addition to the fatwas that are

12 2010, 2011 Annual Report of Dar al-Ifta'

requested by foreign nations, the Grand Mufti has overseen the development and expansion of the mufti-training programs at the Dār al-Iftā’. True to Sheik Ali Gomaa’s repeated emphasis on utilizing modern technologies, Dār al-Iftā’ has now initiated an e-learning program for the training of foreign Muslim scholars and students of knowledge that are not able to come to Egypt. The newly acquired internationalism of Dār al-Iftā’ is reflected in the number of international conferences and symposia in which the Grand Mufti has participated. In 2010 and 2011, these conferences included interfaith meetings as well as academic events from Japan in the East to the United States in the West. Becoming Grand Mufti at a particularly delicate geopolitical configuration, Sheik Ali Gomaa has added to Dār al-Iftā’’s traditional function of serving Egyptian society, the mission to correct the distorted image of Islam worldwide.

The number of employees at Dār al-Iftā’ has grown exponentially under Sheik Ali’s leadership in order to accommodate all the range of innovative projects envisaged by the Grand Mufti. There were 40 employees working at Dār al-Iftā’ when Sheik Ali Gomaa became Grand Mufti. There are now some 250 permanent employees plus some 50 or so working part-time. This increase in staff has allowed Dār al-Iftā’ to raise dramatically its volume of production. According to the 2010, 2011 annual report of Dār al-Iftā’, circulated and widely discussed in the media in December of each year, the institution issued 900,321 fatwas. More than half of these fatwas (500,058) were delivered via the telephone. A quarter of the rulings (250,468) were given through the internet. About 20% of the total (180,133) were oral fatwas. The written fatwas, requiring extra care, numbered 4,316, or over 12 per day.

The topics of the fatwas issued by Dār al-Iftā’ vary immensely, providing a broad and rich overview of contemporary Egyptian society and its religious concerns. The

fatwas deal with everyday matters, such as the ruling for praying alone in line behind the congregation (*salat al-munfarid khalf al-saff*), the specifying of people eligible to receive *zakāt* (alms) money, and sensitive matters of marriage and divorce. Many fatwas also deal with matters of economic import, such as the responsibility to pay for the medical treatment of one's wife, and the status of endowments, and the permissibility of taxing cigarettes. Of course, there are also issues that address contemporary matters as a result of technological advances or changing customs. These include: the marriage of minors, the travel of a single woman without a legal guardian (*mahram*); implanting the sperm of a deceased husband in a woman's womb; medical treatment involving the transplant of pig cells; abortion; the use of animals for scientific experiments; and the permissibility of turning off the machine that keeps the brain-dead patient alive.

The Grand Mufti is under the moral responsibility to answer all questions that are submitted to him. Under his leadership, Dār al-Iftā' has tried to navigate a fine line between its mission of providing authoritative Islamic opinions above politics and the expectations of competing actors in the Egyptian society – state actors, secularists, Islamists and simple believers alike.

Dār al-Iftā' under Sheik Ali Gomaa worked hard to counter the extremist interpretations promoted by some radical Islamist groups who used religion for political purposes. The divergence between Dār al-Iftā' and these marginal groups went far beyond the question of political violence. Sheik Ali Gomaa's fatwa outlining the prohibition of female genital mutilation in Islam and his pragmatic approach to insurance were two examples of opinions that were rejected by this narrow circle of Muslims despite the grounding position of these issues in the authentic spirit of Islamic Law.

In cases when the neutrality of the Egyptian fatwa body proved impossible to realize, Dār al-Iftā' has refrained from

issuing a fatwa altogether. This was the case for example in relation to a question concerning the sale of natural gas to Israel. The Fatwa Commission headed by the Grand Mufti issued a statement clarifying its position. It started by outlining the two common views on this transaction. Some public intellectuals considered that the harms entailed in the sale outweigh the benefits. There are two main reasons for this: one is related to the nature of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands; the other has to do with the strategic value of a scarce resource. Another group, however, sided with the government, considering that the interests outweigh the harms. This group pointed in particular to the need to comply with international agreements which are binding upon the Egyptian state. The Fatwa Commission of Dār al-Iftā’ wisely conceded that it did not possess all the relevant knowledge and technical expertise required to issue a fatwa on this matter. Instead of issuing a definite opinion, the Fatwa Commission called rather for the establishment of a national dialogue between all concerned parties and relevant experts – including economists, political analysts, legal experts and scholars of the Sharī‘ah. This middle course position adopted by the Dār al-Iftā’ symbolizes more generally the willingness of the institution to fulfill its mission of clarifying the Islamic legal position while refusing that religion becomes an instrument for political gamesmanship.

Further evidence of the Dār al-Iftā’’s impartiality can be found in the Grand Mufti’s fatwa from 2009, in which he prohibited the hereditary transfer of the presidency, an issue which was very important to the family of the former president as they wanted to make preparations for the solidification of dynastic rule. Basing himself on the premise that Islamic law recognizes governance as a compact between the ruler and the ruled, Dr. Ali made very clear that such a responsibility could not be bequeathed the way personal property is inherited by the heirs of the deceased. In his opinion, this was impermissible according to the Sharī‘ah as well as the

Egyptian Constitution. This represented a clear example of his departure from the desires of the ruling party, and further demonstrates the role of the Dār al-Iftā’, not as a tool of any regime or political party, but rather an objective and impartial arbitrator on matters which come before it.

The Grand Mufti has also played a key role in the attempts to centralize religious authority and unify the fatwa in the Muslim world. Sheik Ali Gomaa is a member of an elite of Islamic academic excellence. He has been one of the leading voices of the Muslim ummah calling for a code of honor binding upon all muftis, in order to prevent the spread of non-qualified opinions. He has willingly participated in a number of high-profile conferences that sought to implement such guidelines, including the 2007 conference organized by the Kuwait’s Ministry of Religious Affairs on Fatwa-Giving in an Open World and the 2010 symposium held in Mecca by the Muslim World League on the Regulation of the Fatwa. Sheik Ali Gomaa has called in particular for the establishment of an International Islamic Commission for Giving fatwas that might counter the proliferation of anomalous fatwas in the contemporary Muslim world.

The institution of Dār al-Iftā’ in today’s Egypt does not exclusively function as a fatwa-issuing body. Indeed, Dār al-Iftā’ continues to play in the 21st century an important role in the legal process of Egypt – a country which recognizes in its Constitution the principles of Islamic Law as the main source of its legislation. Contrary to many critics, Sheik Ali Gomaa considers that the Egyptian experience over the course of the 20th century provides an instructive and largely successful example of a modern application of Islamic Law by a Muslim state.[13] As the Grand Mufti, Sheik Ali Gomaa has worked regularly with the Egyptian court system to ensure a smooth

13 Ali Gomaa, Al–Tajriba al–Misriyya.

implementation of the Sharī‘ah on a day to day basis. The issues in which the Mufti has been involved in this regard include matters of Islamic family law and cases of capital punishment.

Amongst the most common issues of Islamic family law submitted to the Mufti's expertise are cases of marriage – especially the myriad forms of customary marriage called *zawāj ‘urfī* in Arabic – as well as divorce cases, custody, pensions, and inheritance shares. The importance of family issues in contemporary Egypt – and the necessity of re-establishing healthy family structures in a society undergoing rapid transformation – has been recognized by Sheik Ali Gomaa from an early stage. Accordingly, Dār al-Iftā' – through its Fatwa Commission and its Research Department – has developed a particular expertise in these matters.

Although Egyptian Law considers the Mufti's ruling in matters of capital punishment to constitute simply a consultative opinion which is not binding on the courts, in practice the Grand Mufti's opinion is almost always enforced. In 99% of the cases, however, the evidence is so compelling that the Grand Mufti simply ratifies the court's decision. The Grand Mufti has at his disposal a team of three judges working with him at Dār al-Iftā' to help him understand the subtleties and complexities of each case.

The fatwas and researches produced by Dār al-Iftā' contribute towards the functioning of the Egyptian legal system in direct and indirect ways. Dār al-Iftā' may in this respect said to function like a think tank, a soft power that guides without constraining the work of the courts. Another key function of the Egyptian Dār al-Iftā' is the determination of the lunar calendar and the announcement of the beginning and end of the holy month of Ramadan.

Given the position of the Grand Mufti as one of the highest representatives of Islam in a nation renowned for its leadership in the Muslim world, Sheik Ali Gomaa has also inevitably played a quasi-diplomatic role. In 2010 and 2011, Sheik Ali received at the Dār al-Iftā’ the Ambassadors of the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Iraq, France, Canada, Malaysia, Hungary United states of America, Bulgaria, Denmark, Austria and Japan. He welcomed delegations from Spain, Australia, Germany, Italy, Pakistan, Britain, Thailand, Japan, Turkey, Senegal, France, Kosovo, Canada, India, the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Kuwait, Afghan judges, Malaysian preachers, Russian students, the Muslim community in the Netherlands, the Evangelical Church, the Anglican Church and the UN’s World Food Organization. To all these delegations and others, Sheik Ali Gomaa has consistently emphasized his willingness to promote the authentic and moderate understanding of Islam and to cooperate with others in achieving the common good for the entirety of mankind.

**Annual Dialogue Report on Religion and Values 2011**

One of the international achievements of Dār al-Iftā’ is being the co-editor of the Annual Dialogue Report on Religion and Values in 2011. This annual dialogue report on religion and values is an initiative which is considered to be the first strategic report about dialogue and the role of religion in the contemporary political variables. This strategic report was launched with the partnership of Media Tenor International, a Swiss based media research institute.

The launching of the report took place in the 2012 World Economic Forum meeting in Davos , Switzerland and gained huge importance out of its unique nature as being the first of its kind in analyzing the status of dialogue among different

civilizations, religions and cultures along with the major changing variables in the economic, religious and media spheres. Also, this report aims at indicating the significance of the impact of the religious values on these variables. This report carries within its folds a message of reassurance to the world regarding the future of the religious discourse in Egypt after the recent political changes which resulted in toppling Mubarak's regime. It also places huge emphasis on the role of Al Azhar and its long standing commitment of promoting moderation as a central Islamic principle.

A number of prominent figures participated in the launching of this unique initiative including Salil Shetty, the Secretary General of Amnesty International, Diarmuid Martin, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, Daniel Shapiro, the Associate Director of the Harvard Negotiation Project, Roland Schatz, the CEO of Media Tenor International, Steve Killelea, the executive director of the Institute for Economics and Peace in Australia. The participants in the launching of this report emphasized the importance of such initiative as it helps us having a better understanding of the complicated realities in a world where barriers are being left and where interdependence and coexistence have become an inevitable necessity.

The published annual report on dialogue for 2011 was rich in content and diverse in perspective. The report started with an introduction written by Dr. Ali Gomaa commenting on the anniversary of the Egyptian revolution explaining both the challenges and the prospects facing new Egypt while making its headway towards regaining its leading strategic role in the Middle East and the world.

Dr. Gomaa emphasized the religious inclinations and the deep affiliation of the Egyptian society with religion which results in placing it as an integral part of its cultural heritage; an affiliation which was strongly voiced in voting ballets which favored the Islamist political parties in a free democratic

election. The Islamist political parties in Egypt should not be seen as one entity because they hold divergent positions on different issues such as the economy, minority rights and the role of religion in public sphere. Although Dr. Gomaa may very well disagree with the particulars and nuances of their stances on central issues, he made it abundantly clear that their rise on the political discourse in Egypt should not be a cause for any serious alarm to the Western world as he maintains that flexibility will take precedence in their political programs over doctrinaire readings of ideology.

Post revolutionary Egypt and the role which religion would play in the new political arena that Egypt is about to embark on took a significant interest in this report as 30 pages were dedicated to explaining the future of the religious field in Egypt by Ibrahim Negm, the advisor of the Grand Mufti. In this report, Negm argues that those who see Islamist forces as irreversibly ascendant are insufficiently acquainted with Egyptian cultural and religious traditions. While Islamist parties are undoubtedly important forces within Egypt as the recent elections indicate, the real challenge lies in their ability to live up to the aspirations and sympathies of Egyptian society which largely remains traditionally religious even in the face of increasing modernization and Western influence.

The inherent religious nature of the Egyptian society which gave rise to the Islamist movements in the recent elections and flavored the political scene with overtly religious terms, this religious nature has its root deepened by the role of religious institutions namely Al Azhar which have long acted as the moral compass and religious leadership for the Egyptian society. The profound religious nature of the Egyptian society poses the question of who would be adequately and authentically capable of representing the religious interests of the masses and direct them towards productive democratic ends?

Negm clarified that the only institutions on the ground which would be capable of wielding widespread legitimacy among Egyptians are those which together make up the Azhari paradigm. These are the Azhar University, the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, and the Dār al-Iftā'. One of the central religious figures which according to his past record is capable to involve himself in the political affairs of the country is Ali Gomaa who is well known for being an ardent speaker against extremist discourses.

As a matter of fact extremist discourse is the sensitive nerve and a worrisome element which alarms the Western observers as they wonder about the future of religious discourse in Egypt as an immediate aftermath of the recent political upheaval. The example of Iranian revolution in 1979 was seen by many as the potential political model which Egypt might be adopting especially with the rise of the Islamist elements who can very well hijack the broad based revolution and steer its gear towards constructing an Islamist state whose democratic ambitions would be severely constrained by Islamist commitments.

On the other end of the political spectrum, some have forwarded the political model that is based on political secularism along the lines found in the United States and Europe. The rationale behind this model is that sidelining religion in our case Islam from the political decision making process in both governance and administration is the only way to dampen the worldly ambitions of community leaders speaking in the name of religion. The underlying motivations and concerns behind this political model is understandable especially if it is advanced by Western sources. What this model ignores is the necessity of cultural legitimacy in the fostering of a sustainable political culture and governing institutions.

In spite of the electoral success of Islamist parties, they can hardly sustain themselves as an enduring alternative to the secular attitude positioning themselves at the other end of the political spectrum. Aside from the fact that the Islamist parties are not one entity which has an agreed upon agenda with fixed mind set, the comprehensive Islamist worldview perspective is a relative new comer to the Egyptian religious discourse which gained success partly due to the post revolutionary vacuum within political culture. Egypt has its own long standing tradition of Islam the reader of which would be assured that the versions of religion that seem to animate Islamist forces are widely understood to be foreign impositions on Egyptian soil which has long valued cultural customs over rigid legalities, spirituality over Puritanism and social harmony among the various sectors of society over discord.

Negm further explains in his report that the appropriate move in this fractious environment is not to back any particular party in the hopes that it will turn out to be a panacea for the problems with democracy that currently confront Egypt, but rather to adopt the “long view” and turn to institutions that have the staying power, legitimacy and authority to embed democratic values as part of the Egyptian social and political landscape regardless of the vagaries of party politics; a role that can be advanced by the Egyptian civil society.

Although the concept of civil society is a modern one, the role of interfacing between rulers and citizens has an important precedent in Egypt, having long been fulfilled by the class of religious scholars ‘ulama indigenous to Egypt and trained at the Azhar Mosque and University. The Azhar being the minaret of religious learning and Islamic studies has long served as the propagator of moderation, tolerance and mutual respect among different religions. Its distinctive and holistic view of the purpose of Islamic law shari’ah gives the Azhar a unique methodology and characteristics which aim at

emphasizing on the commonalities which are way more than what divides people apart.

## The Accomplishments of Dār al-Iftā’ in 2011

Dār al-Iftā’ holds an annual press conference in which it presents the achievements that it reached a long the year and the planned goals for the year to come. In 2011 Dār al-Iftā’ succeeded in reaching the following goals:

- It issued more than 400,000 Fatwas or legal advisory opinions through different means of communication whether orally or by phone, or written or via internet.

  In terms of scholarly writings, Dār al-Iftā’ issued the 6th, 7th and 8th volumes of its journal with the state of the art of scholarship in Islamic Law, offering professors of Sharī‘ah across Egypt an almost unique opportunity to publish their researches in a peer-reviewed journal.

- Dār al-Iftā’ issued a book on the rulings of pilgrimage and another one on the rulings of fasting along with republishing a PhD thesis proposed by Sheik Abdelrahman Tag, a former Grand Imam of Al Azhar.

- Dār al-Iftā’ established a vital relationship with media outlets and this is reflected in news coverage of fatwas, reports or press releases which reached last year around 14,000 news items about Dār al-Iftā’ in The national media. This close relationship stems from the firm belief of Dār al-Iftā’ that the media is the mirror which reflects the efforts that are being exerted to reach out for the people and cater for their needs and concerns.
  As for the planned goals for 2012 by Dār al-Iftā’, they

range from social, media and scientific perspectives as its main focus.

- For the media dimension, Dār al-Iftā’ plans to launch a comprehensive all encompassing electronic portal which will be used as an outlet for observing and analyzing different Islamic issues and trends that are rising.
- The training center in Dār al-Iftā’ is planning to offer a course for the journalists who work in the religious field so they would be more familiar with the religious and legal terminologies as an attempt to create an environment of better understanding and deeper media coverage of religious issues.
- For the Juristic dimension, Dār al-Iftā’ is planning to call for an international conference at the end of 2012 to discuss the new contemporary issues that need new legal advisory opinions and edicts or fatwas. Some of these new issues are pertinent to political jurisprudence and women issues along other contemporary issues.
- In this dimension as well Dār al-Iftā’ is proposing an initiative of having an international Iftā’ body in which legal advisory opinions on issues of common interests to the Muslim world are united in its perspective as well as exchanging scientific research papers on different Islamic issues.
- For the social dimensionl, Dār al-Iftā’ is planning to launch a pack of initiatives on issues that are pertinent to conflict resolution, offering parenting classes and tips in raising children along other social issues that are of concern.
- Dār al-Iftā’ is planning an Iftā’ distance learning center to reach out to students who seeks Islamic learning and religious studies.

## Chapter 4: On Dialogue

The end of the 20th century and the dawn of the 21st appear to be marked by a proliferation of discourses on civilizational clashes and a recrudescence of violence across the world. Recent events have strained the relationship between the Muslim world and Western societies in particular. Sheik Ali Gomaa has responded proactively to this turbulent configuration by emphasizing the Islamic understandings of dialogue, rebuilding trust, and partaking in a common word.

The engagement of Sheik Ali Gomaa with questions of dialogue and difference has taken a myriad of forms. In Egypt, he has called for harmonious relations between Muslims and Christians. In the wider Islamic World, Sheik Ali has urged Sunni and Shi‘ī Muslims to set their differences aside and work for the common good. At the global level, the Mufti of Egypt has tried to spread a culture of dialogue that may replace or at least ease the conflictual nature of the times.

### Philosophy of Dialogue

The engagement of Sheik Ali Gomaa with questions of dialogue is built upon a philosophy and theology that the Grand Mufti has outlined in detail in various publications.

Dialogue according to the Mufti of Egypt is a responsibility that accrues to Muslims by virtue of the nature of their religion. Islam is the last Message until the Day of Judgment. It addresses all of humankind. These two properties found the universality of Islam and require that Muslims engage in dialogue in the best of ways. Islam is indeed an open worldview which never seeks to erect barriers between Muslims and others. Rather, Muslims must approach the other with open hearts intent on trying to clarify matters, and not to

attack every person who offers objections for this latter detracts from the purpose of dialogue and understanding.

Muslims must be driven by the principle of conviviality, living together in harmony, and not be intent on converting every non-Muslim, for God Himself has made clear that "There is no compulsion in religion," (Al-Baqara:256). Interfaith dialogue need not conclude with a winner and a loser. The purpose of dialogue should not be to convert others, but rather to share with them one's principles. Sincere dialogue should strengthen one's faith while, at the same time, breaking down barriers. The Qur'an makes clear that the attitude of the Muslim should be "Whosoever wants, let them believe; and whosoever wants, let them disbelieve." (Al-Kahf:29), underscoring the reality of the Omnipotence of God and that such matters are not in the hands of creation.

When Muslims turn to the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet, therefore, they will find that dialogue – and not competition – is what is required of them. Dialogue is a process of exploration, and coming to know the other, as much as it is an example of clarifying one's own positions. Therefore, when one dialogues with others, what is desired is to explore their ways of thinking, so as to correct misconceptions in our own minds and arrive at a common ground. This common ground is the desideratum of all dialogue, and lays the groundwork for mutual cooperation based on the principles of "faith in God" and "good relations with neighbors."

Indeed, Sheik Ali Gomaa has categorized dialogue as a form of jihad, defined here as a struggle in the path of Allah. As we have seen, the value of dialogue is taught in the Qur'an itself, as well as in the Prophetic sunna, but equally, the long history

of Muslims bears witness to the importance and high place of dialogue in the Islamic tradition.[14]

Sheik Ali Gomaa stresses in his activities of dialogue with the Other on the necessity of starting with oneself. As an Islamic religious scholar, he is particularly sensitive to the weaknesses and flaws of Muslims themselves. For Sheik Ali, the corruption of Muslims may be said to stand for the corruption of the world at large, just as their righteousness stands for the world's righteousness. This vision follows naturally from the way Islam constructs the role of the human being in this world.[15] Starting with oneself is an adequate strategy for dialogue with the Other, not least because it canalizes energies into positive and productive directions.

The key is building trust between people. According to the Grand Mufti, the Islamic viewpoint – and, as Sheik Ali points out, this is indeed a viewpoint shared with many religions – is that there are two important manifestations of trust. One is the trust displayed by humans towards God in their reliance on Him, their conviction in His plan, and dependence on Fate. However, the believer's trust in God need not distract him from the laws of nature which structure our existence in this world. As such, it is of no less importance to cultivate a set of relationships in our worldly lives which are built on trust, cooperation and understanding.

As the Grand Mufti has repeatedly made clear, the quest for understanding and trust that underlies any dialogue is a process that requires equal and equally willing partners on both sides. The world is in dire need of forums which facilitate genuine dialogue in a shrinking world – a dialogue that stems from the recognition of identities and specificities; a dialogue

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14 Wa Qala Al–Imam, chapter on dialogue.
15 Responding from Tradition, Question 4.

that remains respectful and does not seek to inflame hostilities or dominate the other; a dialogue that is itself based upon a respect for religious plurality and cultural diversity; a dialogue that does not turn into a one-sided conversation. Dialogue for the Mufti is thus not about trying to defeat others, but about understanding and learning about them. As the Qur'an states, God has created us into nations and tribes so that we may learn about each other (49:13). According to Sheik Ali, engaging in such a constructive dialogue should be one of our highest priorities. Constructive dialogue is a powerful tool in conflict prevention, management and resolution. It can defuse tension and keep situations from escalating. And a truly constructive dialogue maintains boundaries of respect and tolerance. Ali Gomaa likes to quote from the Qur'an here, reminding his audiences that the world's beauty lies in its racial and religious pluralism; otherwise, God would not have created such diversity (10:99 and 5:48).

The necessity of dialogue is predicated upon the Mufti's vision of intercultural relations. Although the Mufti recognizes that there are attempts to disturb the peaceful relations between Islam and the West, he considers that the appropriate response lies not in attack or defense – two distasteful actions – but in calling towards a common word. This course of action has its basis on the famous Qur'anic dictum.

Dialogue however cannot remain within a narrow elite of specialists – academic and intellectual circles. As Sheik Ali Gomaa tirelessly tells his interlocutors, dialogue must be activated and practiced – not remain enclosed within the walls of conference rooms. [16] Rather, dialogue must demystify religious differences to everyday people and help explain the divine wisdom behind religious diversity. It should uncover rays of truth that get buried under the rubble of human biases

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16 Bayan Dar al–Ifta (meeting with Dutch Ambassador).

and tendencies to follow that which is convenient. Dialogue can only lead people to examine more deeply their religious identity and bear witness to the greatness of God.

## The Egyptian Context

Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt have emerged as a controversial topic of debate in the country relatively recently. The peaceful coexistence between the two communities has characterized Egypt's history from time immemorial. Muslims and Christians have lived together harmoniously for many centuries. Both communities are equally attached to the land of Egypt, its security and prosperity. The outbursts of sectarian violence that have occurred in recent times have thus surprised many observers. They have been vehemently condemned by the Mufti of Egypt, as well as by all the other religious authorities in the country. As Co-Chair of the C-1 World Dialogue, Sheik Ali Gomaa condemned the New Year's explosion outside a Church in Alexandria in 2011 as a "horrific attack" which "can have no possible justification". Such a terrorist act constituted "an affront to all Egyptians". It should not be used to "sow discord" between Christians and Muslims, but rather serve to consolidate the bond between the two communities.[17] Elsewhere, Sheik Ali Gomaa has been adamant that the bond of citizenship is stronger than any sectarian temptation in Egypt.[18] The events leading to the fall of the Mubarak regime in January and February 2011 seem to have proven the Mufti right. During those weeks, the Mufti saw Christians and Muslims in Egypt drawing on their own spirituality to effect great change: "They took turns protecting one another as they prayed. They worked together for the sake of the nation, putting their personal security aside, organizing security patrols and sharing food amongst each other" –

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17 http://www.yale.edu/faith/ne/documents/C1onAlexandriaBombing.pdf.

18 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 17/2/2010.

embodying the kind of interfaith relations that Islam and Christianity, properly understood, call for.[19]

The management of relations between the two major religious communities of the nation remains nevertheless a fraught issue in post-revolutionary Egypt. Amidst intense debate over the future constitution of the Egyptian state, the Mufti has throughout 2011 argued that Egypt should remain a civil state, not a religious one – albeit one guided by the Islamic reference (*al-dawla al-madaniyya bi-l-marja'iyyah al-islamiyya*). Like the majority of Egyptian scholars and intellectuals, Sheik Ali Gomaa believes that Article 2 of the Constitution – present in all Egyptian constitutions since 1923 – is crucial to the identity of the state. The article consecrates Islam as the religion of the Egyptian state, Arabic as its official language, and the principles of the Sharīʻah as the main source of legislation. Article 2 thus represents a sort of supra-constitutional article that permeates the history of the country and therefore should not give rise to division or controversy. As Sheik Ali has argued, "acknowledgement of a nation's religious heritage is an issue of national identity, and need not interfere with the civil nature of its political process".[20] For Ali Gomaa, the constitutional invocation of the Sharīʻah guarantees the rights of non-Muslims.[21] There is therefore no contradiction between Article 2 asserting Islam as the religion of the state and Article 7 of Egypt's interim Constitution guaranteeing equal citizenship before the law regardless of religion, race or creed. Egyptian laws – Sheik Ali maintains – must apply equally to all Egyptian citizens. Egypt's unique historical experience can provide a practical model for a modern civil state with an

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19 Catholic–Muslim Dialogue, Jordan 2011.
20 Ali Gomaa, In Egypt's Democracy, Room for Islam, New York Times, 1/4/2011.
21 Al–Masry al–Yawm, 26/3/2011, p. 12

Islamic reference[22] for, as Sheik Ali wrote in the New York Times on April 1st, 2011, “Egypt’s religious tradition is anchored in a moderate, tolerant view of Islam”.

Ali Gomaa is also a staunch defender of the concept of citizenship. The Mufti refuses categorically to divide people into first, second or third class citizens: citizenship only has a meaning if it applies to everyone equally.[23] According to Ali Gomaa, the concept of citizenship (*muwatana*) corresponds to the historical example set by the Prophet in Medina. In the first Madinan period Muslims found themselves ruling – under the leadership of the Prophet – a society that was pluralistic. One finds in this period an early recognition of the principles of citizenship, codification of laws, and the establishment of a constitution – the Constitution of Medina (*wathīqat al-madīna*) – binding upon all parties. As Sheik Ali Gomaa points out, this political practice resembles what French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau would much later call “the social contract”.[24]

Sheik Ali Gomaa’s interpretations of Islamic Law have emphasized the rights of Christians and Jews – known collectively as the People of the Book – living in Muslim lands. Under the supervision of the Grand Mufti, Dār al-Iftā’ has issued a fatwa allowing Christians to repair as well as build new places of worship, thus putting an end to a controversy in some Islamic circles.[25] He has made it clear that the rights of the Christian minority in Egypt – including their right to seek election to the presidency – is sacrosanct.[26]

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22 Al–Masry al–Yawm, 21/10/2011.
23 Al–Ahram, 22/1/2011, p.24
24 Wa Qala Al Imam, chapter “hadi al–nabi sala allah alayhi wa sallam fi al–ta’ayush ma‘ al–akhar”, here p 267.
25 Fatwa on Building Places of Worship, 2011.
26 Ali Gomaa, In Egypt’s Democracy, Room for Islam, New York Times, 1/4/2011.

Cognizant of the pluralistic nature of contemporary Egyptian society, the Mufti has established a key distinction between (positive) law and (religious) ethics. While some practices such as building statues, drinking wine or gambling are forbidden in Islam – and should therefore be refused by pious Muslims – the nature of Egyptian society requires that one refrains from imposing these prohibitions to the whole of the population coercively. Islam as a religion allows Muslim believers to live and interact with others peacefully in any time or place.[27]

## The Muslim World

Sectarianism is a plight that has also affected relations within the Muslim ummah. Two dimensions might be distinguished here: the divergence within Sunni schools of thought; and the difference between Sunni and Shi'ī Muslims. The latter has taken on a particularly tragic dimension in recent years, resulting in the horrific shedding of innocent blood across parts of the Muslim world particularly in Iraq; but the former too has caused much unnecessary conflict and tension within Muslim communities. Sheik Ali Gomaa has tried to act consistently as a voice of reason in this regard. Against the extremist tendencies that have made headlines recently, the Mufti of Egypt stresses the historic role and responsibility of Al-Azhar in spreading a culture of moderation amongst Muslims all over the world. In a fatwa published in *Al-Bayan*, Sheik Ali Gomaa has clarified his understanding of the position of Al-Azhar in relation to Shī'a Islam. The Mufti stresses that the differences between Sunnis and Shī'tes are related to "secondary matters". They both agree on theological issues: "there is no divergence in their convictions concerning God, the Prophet, revelation, or belief in the unseen". Despite the differences in juristic matters between the four Sunni

27 Wa Qala al Imam.

juridical schools (Malikī, Shafi‘ī, Hanafī and Hanbalī) and the Shi‘ī counterparts (Ja‘farī and Zaydī), Sunni scholars – including Sheik Ali Gomaa himself – also may consult the latter when deciding on a specific case. The Ja’afarī and the Zaydī schools of Islamic fiqh continue to be taught in Al-Azhar University, a bastion of Sunnism for one thousand years. Sheik Ali Gomaa is thus categorical: “the Shi’ītes are a part of the Muslim community (*al-ummah al-islamiyyah*) and cannot be separated from it or eschewed”.[28]

The contemporary Muslim world has also been witness to tension and violence between different Sunni schools of thought. In order to solve these problems, Sheik Ali participated in the drafting of the declaration known as the Amman Message in 2004/2005. The declaration sought to clarify what Islam is and is not, what actions represent it and what do not, and who is entitled to speak in its name. The Amman Message recognized the validity of all eight legal schools of Sunni, Shī’a and Ibadī Islam. On this basis, the drafters of the Amman Message forbade declarations of apostasy between Muslims – a practice that has spread in recent years and whose harm cannot be overestimated. Finally, the Amman Message set strict conditions for the issuing of fatwas, exposing the self-claimed and illegitimate rulings issued by non-qualified individuals in the name of Islam. The Amman Message thus sought to address one of the most dangerous problems of the contemporary Muslim world: the blind violence committed against Muslims and non-Muslims alike as a result of the proliferation of unqualified religious discourses. Sheik Ali Gomaa consistently emphasizes, here and elsewhere, the necessity of a centralized and independent religious authority capable of speaking authoritatively in the name of Islam. For the Grand Mufti it is clear that extremists using Islam for political purposes are manipulating religion.

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28 Ali Gomaa, Responding from the Tradition, forthcoming.

They lack scholarly qualifications and seek only to create havoc and chaos in the world. Marginalizing those voices and returning to the mainstream scholars of the ummah is perhaps the most pressing task ahead.

The Mufti regularly participates in a variety of conferences and gatherings throughout the Muslim world that promote moderation and coexistence. In Kuwait in 2006, Sheik Ali Gomaa was amongst the select group of Muslim scholars participating in a high-profile conference organized by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Religious Endowments about the relation between Islam and the Other. Such efforts are an integral part of Sheik Ali's attempt to promote a culture of tolerance in intra- and inter-faith milieu – a culture that he profoundly believes to be the heritage of Al-Azhar and of authentic Islam.

**Islam and the West**

Perhaps the most visible engagement of Sheik Ali Gomaa in interfaith dialogue has taken place on the international stage. Despite an inauspicious global configuration, to say the least, the Mufti of Egypt has spared no effort in trying to bring Muslims and others together in peace and harmony.

Sheik Ali Gomaa's deep concern for West-Muslim relations comes in part from his understanding of the historical interconnectedness between the two civilizations. For the Mufti of Egypt, the historical exchange between Muslim societies and Europe is a well-established and documented fact which has enriched both sides immeasurably. Sheik Ali Gomaa not only highlights the contribution of Muslim thinkers to Western and global civilization. He also acknowledges that Muslim civilization has absorbed much from European civilizational accomplishments. A key feature of Islamic civilization, according to Ali Gomaa, is its moral, humanitarian and cosmopolitan worldview. While Muslims are proud of their civilization, they do not reject other

civilizations. Rather, they work with others who seek to achieve a constructive development of the world.[29] The need for dialogue with the West stems also from the realization of the increasingly global and interdependent nature of the world we live in[30] – a world unfortunately defined by economic excess and environmental neglect.[31]

As a preamble to dialogue, Sheik Ali Gomaa has sought first of all to clarify the wide-spread and wide-ranging misunderstandings concerning Islam in the West. The Mufti was involved in a number of academic projects which tried to respond to the accusations leveled by ill-intentioned missionaries and orientalists against Islam.[32] Thanks to his familiarity with both Western and Islamic scholarship, Sheik Ali Gomaa often draws on the objective scholarship of Muslim and non-Muslim academic experts to set the record straight.

Sheik Ali Gomaa also engaged in the drafting of a collective Muslim response to the statements pronounced by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg in 2006. Entitled “Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI”, the Mufti of Egypt and 37 other prominent Islamic scholars constructively engaged the Pope’s comments on Islam pronounced in the infamous lecture. Reiterating the Pope’s words to “oppose the dominance of positivism and materialism in human life”, the panel of Muslim scholars decisively clarified the Islamic position on compulsion in religion, the transcendence of God, the use of reason, holy war and forced conversion. Despite the need for such a clarification, the Muslim scholars commended the Pope for his “desire for frank and sincere dialogue” and thanked him for

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29 Zurich speech. October 2010

30http://acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/16-conferences/16-communique-from-a–common-word-conference.html.

31 Catholic–Muslim Dialogue, Jordan 2011.

32 Kalimat Haqq, episode 11.

his expression of "total and profound respect for all Muslims".[33]

The Mufti of Egypt was one of the founders of the Common Word initiative ("A Common Word Between Us and You"), which expanded the Open Letter into a more general address to Christian leaders and believers. In October 2007, Sheik Ali Gomaa participated in the pioneering conference convened by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan to promote cooperation between Christendom and the Muslim world. Sheik Ali became a signatory at the end of that conference to the declaration titled "A Common Word between Us and You" in which Christian leaders joined with Muslim ones to emphasize their similarities, and their dedication to the welfare of their societies as a result of their devotion to God. The Common Word stressed the most fundamental common ground between Islam and Christianity, which consists simultaneously of the best basis for future dialogue and understanding, namely that of love: love of God and love of the neighbor. The importance of the document has not been missed. The Common Word initiative was hailed by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams as a "landmark in Muslim-Christian relations".[34] It received Germany's Eugen Biser award in 2008, prompting the Federal Minister of the Interior Wolfgang Schäuble to recognize the initiative's model and visionary contribution to a better understanding between Muslims and Christians.[35] Pope Benedict XVI himself was moved to acknowledge the momentous nature of A Common Word, establishing the World Muslim-Catholic Forum in March 2008. The Mufti has personally spared no effort

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33 Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XIV.
34 http://www.acommonword.com/
35 Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble, Religious diversity and social cohesion in Germany (http://www.acommonword.com/Bundesinnenminister-Dr-Schauble-Rede-22-11-2008.pdf)

promoting the Common Word initiative, including travelling to the United Kingdom and the United States in order to outline the conditions necessary for translating the common word into practical action.[36] Sheik Ali Gomaa himself and the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams presented the final statement of one such event, a Common Word conference held in Cambridge in October 2008, in which they outlined the need to promote the use of educational materials providing a fair reflection of Islam and Christianity; the commitment to build a network of academic institutions to work on shared values; and the desire to facilitate exchanges between future religious leaders of the two traditions (among others).[37]

Sheik Ali Gomaa continues to this day to be directly and actively involved in dialogue with the Catholic world. Despite recent strains in relations between the Vatican and the religious authorities of the Muslim World, the Mufti of Egypt tries indefatigably to rebuild bridges of trust and dialogue. He is a key participant in the Catholic-Muslim Forum, which convened for the first time in Rome in November 2008 and for the second time in Jordan three years later. In his speeches, Sheik Ali Gomaa not only explains the nature of his work as Grand Mufti – the process of issuing fatwas – but seeks to outline the ground upon which more fruitful collaborative projects between Islam and the Christian world might take place.

An example of the kind of cooperation between Christians and Muslims envisaged by Sheik Ali was provided by the symposium on “Islam, Christianity and the Environment” held

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36 A conference of the Common World in Cambridge in Oct 2008 was followed by another held at Georgetown University the following year.
37 http://acommonword.com/en/a-common-word/16-conferences/16-communique-from-a-common-word-conference.html.

in Amman in September 2010. Muslim and Christian leaders presented research papers discussing a variety of issues, including the rights of animals in Islam, Christian conceptions of environmental ethics, and the Islamic perspective on environmental pollution.

Sheik Ali Gomaa is keen to emphasize continuities and commonalities between Islam and the Abrahamic Faiths of Judaism and Christianity. If the Jewish Book is the Old Testament, and the Christian Scriptures is the New Testament, then the Muslim Holy Qur'an is the Last Testament. There is no contradiction in affirming simultaneously that Islam is the last religion sent to humanity, and that it constitutes the same message followed by all previous prophets.[38] Accordingly, Sheik Ali Gomaa has been a prominent member of the Coexist Foundation, acting as a trustee of this charitable organization that works to promote understanding of Jews, Christians and Muslims through education, dialogue and respect. The Coexist Foundation shares Sheik Ali's focus on actions rather than words. It supports educational programs that may change misconceptions and misunderstandings; promotes dialogue and reconciliation between groups; and encourages research on relations between the Abrahamic faiths, and between these faiths and others.

Realizing that many people in the West no[39] longer identify with Christianity or Judaism, Sheik Ali Gomaa has also sought to build bridges with people outside the Abrahamic religions. Alongside the Anglican Bishop of London, the Right Rev. & Hon. Dr. Richard Chartres, the Mufti of Egypt acts as the Co-Chair of the C-1 World Dialogue. This organization is a high-level international body which strives to advance peaceful and

38 See his fatwa on this question in Responding from Tradition.
39 See http://www.coexistfoundation.net/en-gb/page/9/mission-and-vision.htm.

harmonious relations between the West and the Islamic world in general – not only to promote understanding between religious groups. Members of the C1 executive include Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad bin Talal of Jordan, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the renowned American scholar of contemporary Islam John Esposito, and the Grand Mufti of Bosnia Mustafa Ceric. C-1 World Dialogue was the product of the Council of One Hundred Leaders (C-100) West-Islamic Dialogue, an initiative launched by the World Economic Forum in the aftermath of the tragedy of 9/11. The Co-Chairs of the C-1 World Dialogue systematically speak out against all acts of violence, including the horrifying attack in Alexandria outside a Coptic Church or the recent attacks against Christians in Pakistan.

The Annual Dialogue Reports produced by C-1 provide a unique overview of the state of Muslim West Dialogue. Cumulatively they track and measure developments in the views on Muslims held by citizens of non-Muslim countries and vice-versa. Some of these developments – like the growing distrust of Christians in Turkey (from 44% of Turks unfavorable to Christianity in 2004 to 74 % in 2008) are worrying and need to be effectively addressed. As Sheik Ali Gomaa stresses, these studies provide the knowledge required for devising adequate strategies of change and reform: "Action is clearly vital…but it must be based on knowledge if it is to be effective".[40]

For Ali Gomaa, in order for dialogue between Islam and the West to be fruitful, it is necessary to recognize that modernity is a condition we all inhabit, rather than the achievement of a particular group of people. The Mufti mobilizes the concept of "alternative modernities" to capture the diversity of the world in encountering new realities. In his speeches and conferences

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40 http://www.mediatenor.com/newsletters.php?id_news=258.

the Mufti seeks to cultivate a space where religious and non-religious people may work together. The main obstacle for realizing this currently lies in an overly aggressive secularism which seeks to banish all signs of religion from public life, as well as a rising hostility to Muslims in Europe and North America.[41] Just as the Mufti has been relentless in his condemnation of fanatical tendencies amongst Muslims as inauthentic, he has also vocally condemned the extremist groups in the West that spread anti-Muslim feelings.

Sheik Ali Gomaa's approach is characterized by a willingness to learn lessons from the recurrent conflicts and an attempt to move the discussion forward. In a recent meeting with the Danish Ambassador in Cairo, for example, Sheik Ali Gomaa has expressed a desire to heal the wounds caused by the publication of the infamous Danish Cartoons.

The realization of the crucial role played by the media lies at the basis of the Mufti's willingness to contribute to public discussions on Islam in the West, through visits, conference talks, newspaper articles and TV appearances in media outlets through out Europe and North America. In a speech given in Zurich one year after the Swiss minaret ban, the Mufti criticized the little visibility given to Muslim voices in the debates leading to the referendum. Sheik Ali Gomaa stressed once again the need for media professionals to abide by their own rule of "*audiatur et altera pars*" when it comes to religious issues.[42]

Sheik Ali Gomaa's approach to interfaith dialogue – allied to his sophisticated knowledge of the Western social sciences – has made the Grand Mufti a privileged partner in various intellectual and academic projects conducted by Western

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41 Zurich speech.
42 Zurich speech October 2010

universities. One of these projects is currently conducted by the prestigious American Catholic University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. Entitled “Contending Modernities: Catholic, Muslim, Secular”, the aim of the cross-cultural enterprise is – in the words of its director – to “generate new knowledge and understanding of the ways in which religious and secular people and institutions interact” and to “harness the power of ideas to chart a way forward across religious and secular divides to address the greatest challenges of the 21st century.”[43] The multi-year project will tackle crucial if sensitive questions such as the proper role of religiously inspired political parties and social movements; debates about gender and the rights of women and children; the conflict between claims to exclusive truth and respect for religious pluralism, bioethical issues ranging from birth control to abortion to genetic engineering; and the tension between religious principles of social justice and the seemingly value-neutral dynamics of a global market economy.[44] The Mufti had the honor of giving a plenary speech at the public launch event in New York in November 2010, providing an Islamic perspective to a timely global debate.

43 http://diversity.nd.edu/news/17774-notre-dame-launches-global-research-project-on-catholic-muslim-secular-interaction/.
44 http://kroc.nd.edu/research/religion-conflict-peacebuilding/contending-modernities

## Chapter 5: On Women

As a religious leader with a sensitivity to both the intellectual debates of the time as well as the circumstances of the Muslim community, Sheik Ali Gomaa has long taken an interest in the questions raised with respect to Islam and women, publishing a number of fatwa collections exclusively devoted to the topic, addressing contemporary matters in public lectures and study circles, and convening seminars to investigate how better to advance women's rights.

This has in response to the realization that modern Western concepts have begun to have great impact on Muslim societies, and in particular doubts about the status of women within the Islamic worldview had begun to proliferate. The history of Islam had not itself been previously confronted with what is now called "women's issues". This has been so despite the great diversity in customs and cultures among Muslims over the centuries. As a result of their encounter with the West, however, and its particular history during the Dark Ages, calls began to be hard about liberating women. Though these have found their way into the discourse of those living in Muslim societies, the truth is that the Muslim woman has been liberated for centuries under Islamic rule.

What is striking in this new discourse, according to the Grand Mufti, is the way in which it puts women against men in a continuous struggle and state of competition. Islam, however, is a religion which recognizes the equal status of men and women in the eyes of God, as is attested by numerous passages in the Holy Qur'an. The most fundamental aspect of this status is the unity of the human spirit in which both genders share. As Allah says, "O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread

abroad a multitude of men and women. Be careful of your duty toward Allah in Whom ye claim (your rights) of one another, and toward the wombs (that bare you).” (Al-Nisa’:1)

Similarly, He has made clear on more than one occasion the spiritual equality of men and women in matters of religious worship, considering solely the sincerity of their acts of worship and piety. Instead of paying any attention to the gender (or ethnicity or class) of the worshipper, Allah has made the standard for acceptance of one’s worship based on the degree of reverence, sincerity, and purity of heart exhibited by the worshipper. As He says in his Holy Book, “O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.” (Al-Hujuraat: 13). Indeed, it may be said that not only are the genders equal in their servitude to the Almighty, but indeed all of creation presents itself before Him as simply a servant: “There is nothing in the heavens and the earth but that it will come to the All-Merciful as a servant.” (Maryam: 93).

The matter is no different in terms of legal obligations, and the rewards and punishments that accrue from those obligations, as is clearly stated in the following verse: “He that works evil will not be requited but by the like thereof: and he that works a righteous deed – whether man or woman – and is a Believer- such will enter the Garden (of Bliss): Therein will they have abundance without measure.” (Ghafir: 40). The very structure of legality in the Sharīʻah is based on a reciprocity which recognizes the importance of according equality to women. As the Qur’an says “And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable.” (Al-Baqarah: 228).

The fundamental principle is that they are both honored members of creation possessing equality with respect to

spirituality and worship, Following from this spiritual and legal equality is the equity envisioned by Islam in the social relations between men and women. Socially, the relationship between them is one of complementarity, and not of competition. As the Qur'an says, "And in no wise covet those things in which Allah Hath bestowed His gifts More freely on some of you than on others: To men is allotted what they earn, and to women what they earn: But ask Allah of His bounty." (Al-Nisa: 32). From this follows, the concept of social equity, and not identity. This standpoint maintains the distinction between men as men, and women as women, a distinction which has come under attack from some materialist philosophies. Each of the genders fulfills their roles in life, in accordance with their natural specificities and responsibilities.

The extent to which the Islamic worldview on male-female relations constitutes a remarkable breakthrough can only be appreciated against the background of the pre-Islamic customs practiced by the Arabs. Describing these customs, the Qur'an castigates this state of affairs in the strongest possible terms: "When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah! what an evil (choice) they decide on?" (Al-Nahl: 58-59). Indeed, Allah warns the reader of the position on the Day of Judgment of one who commits such infanticide, the day "when the female (infant), buried alive, is questioned – For what crime she was killed." (Al-Takwir: 8-9) . In place of the shame and embarrassment regularly occasioned by the birth of a baby girl, then, the Prophet of Islam came with a message to expressly state that, "Women are the sisters of men." (Sunan Abu Dawud, Sunan Tirmidhi).

Unfortunately, it has become common to think of Islam as precisely the means by which women are oppressed, whereas

it is obvious to any clear-minded historian that the place of women in the medieval period was much stronger in the Islamic world than it was in the Western world. There are now, however, a number of allegations leveled against Islamic thought, culture and civilization with regards to particular women's issues. As we have seen above, the Islamic worldview is based closely on a conception of male-female relations with stresses the importance of women, and values their contributions to society. It is then not surprising that the particularities of Islamic law reflect this status accorded to women, and in fact honor them for their particularities and specificities. This is the basis for a healthy family arrangement: one in which roles and responsibilities are well understood, and antagonism between the sexes is not seen as a natural state of affairs, but rather a divergence from the ideal which both sides must work towards minimizing and overcoming. This reflects a deep equality and harmony between the sexes which is not accounted for when one focuses on superficial expressions of sameness or identity.

In an effort, however, to clarify the Islamic worldview and dispel a number of misconceptions surrounding Islam's position on women, the remainder of this chapter takes up the positions of the Grand Mufti on common objections leveled against Islam.

## Female Genital Mutilation

The distinguishing characteristic of mankind, according to the Qur'an, is the dignity bestowed upon it by God: "We have dignified the children of Adam ... and favored them over much of creation." Human dignity is, therefore, a fundamental tenet of the Islamic worldview. It should be no surprise, then, that Islam's emergence and presence in the world has been one which has placed a very high regard on the protection of human rights. This concern is heightened considerably when one turns to the most vulnerable members of society. Indeed,

one of the first missions of the Prophet Muhammad was to express his outrage and denunciation at the pre-Islamic Arab customs surrounding newborn girls, customs which saw them as less than human and a source of embarrassment to the family.

These are long-standing and unshakeable principles which are representative of the enduring spirit of Islam. It is crucial, therefore, that at this stage in our historical development, they be understood within the context of modern social conditions and the state of scientific knowledge today. With this in mind, Dār al-Iftā’ convened an international conference in November 2006 on the topic of female genital mutilation (FGM). Participants included scientists, scholars of Islamic law, specialist researchers on the topic, and activists from civil rights organizations in Egypt and around the world. Upon hearing an array of presentations from across the spectrum, the conference concluded that the mutilation practiced in some parts of Egypt, Africa and elsewhere today represents a deplorable custom which finds no justification in the authoritative sources of Islam, the Qur’an and the practice of the Prophet Muhammad.

One of the highest values of Islamic law is the Prophetic command to neither inflict nor accept harm. This imperative will be familiar to non-Muslims as the golden rule. A universal commandment that applies to all, irrespective of social class or gender, special care must be taken to ensure that no type of harm befalls those who can neither cause nor repel harm on their own, the weak and helpless in our societies. In light of this reality, and because of the significant physical and psychological harm to young girls (and later women) caused by FGM, all measures must be taken to put a halt to this unacceptable tradition.

Thus, one of the recommendations of the conference was that taking active action on this front is crucial if we are to remain

true to our Islamic values and principles. Islam is a religion of knowledge, learning and research. While it was previously practiced as a social custom (and not a religious matter), the state of today's knowledge makes clear the serious negative effects on women of such practices. As such, it becomes a religious obligation to say unequivocally that the practice of FGM is today forbidden in Islam.

The findings of the conference represented a call to the peoples of the Muslim world – in Egypt and beyond – to hold fast to their Islamic identity by ending this deplorable custom in their communities. Injuring oneself or another in any form is expressly and categorically forbidden. In connection with this, it is enough for us to quote the example of our Beloved Prophet – the Mercy to all Mankind – who never subjected any of his daughters to this practice.

The conference opined that true eradication of FGM depends heavily on the cooperation of international and religious institutions to concentrate their efforts on educating and instructing their populations on this matter in accordance with the Islamic prohibition against harm. In addition to the Islamic legal position outlined above, special attention must be given to raising basic awareness of female hygiene and medicine. Educational establishments and media, for their part, have a duty to educate people about the devastating consequences of this practice on those who are subject to it, as well as on society at large.

In addition, legislative organs in the countries of the Muslim world ought to take decisive action by passing laws which ban the practice of this gruesome custom, declaring it a crime once and for all. Both the actual perpetrators as well as the initiators of instances of FGM must be subject to the full punitive extent of the law in view of the seriousness of the crime against society's most vulnerable members. International institutions

and organizations are encouraged to provide help in all regions to facilitate its elimination.

Islam is, without doubt, a religion that adapts and develops to the changing conditions of the world, and the state of scientific knowledge. The enduring commitment to human rights and dignity demand action on our part towards the eradication of FGM.

**Women as heads of state**

Islam has never restricted women's roles in society to some domains at the expense of others. A woman was the first to accept the message of the Prophet (May God shower His peace and blessings upon him). The first martyr in the cause of Islam was a woman, as was the first emigrant (*muhajir*). And women have continued to occupy lofty positions throughout the centuries: they have been rulers, judges, warriors, teachers, muftis, etc. Any honest student of Islamic history can testify to this.

As for being a head of state, there is one hadith that has alluded to the impermissibility of this, suggesting that people who appoint a woman as their leader will not prosper. However, Islamic history has seen more than fifty examples of female rulers throughout different time periods and empires, such as Sitt al-Mulk in Egypt, Queens Asma' and Arwa in Sana, Zaynab al-Nafzawiya in al-Andalus, Sultana Radia in Delhi, Shajarat al-Durr in Egypt and Syria, Aisha al-Hurra in al-Andalus, just to name a few. This is no doubt a consequence of the Prophet's affirmation of women's participation in public life, wars, learning institutions, the police (*hisba*), and the marketplace.

Because of the aforementioned hadith, many jurists have maintained the impermissibility of a female head of state or judge. The Hanafī school maintained the permissibility of a

female judge in restricted contexts. However, some have opined that it is entirely permissible for a woman to be either a judge or a head of state. Among these are Ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī, Ibn hazm al-Zahirī, Abu al-Fath ibn Tarar, Ibn al-Qasim, and one narration from Imam Malik.

It is important to keep in mind that this hadith was a response to a particular context and circumstance, namely the case of the Persians who had appointed a woman as their leader as a last resort. The Prophetic hadith therefore is to be taken not as a prescription, but rather as an indication of the Persian's waning fortunes. The principles of jurisprudence are clear that particular circumstances do not establish generality. Furthermore, Allah Himself relates the story of Bilqis, the Queen of Sheba in the Qur'an, extolling her competence and sagacity.

It also bears noting that there is a significant difference between the lofty position of Caliph of Islam and simply the head of a contemporary state. The Caliphate is a religious post, whose duties include leading the believers in prayer, and which is subject to strict conditions mentioned by the jurists. However, the head of state is a civil position, with no pretensions to the leadership of all Muslims. Therefore, a woman has every right to occupy this position.

### The right of a woman to choose her husband

Islam has granted equal rights to men and woman in choosing their spouses. Because an Islamic marriage is valid and legitimate only if there is genuine consent on the part of both husband and wife, parents (and all other parties) are prohibited from forcing their children into unwanted marriages. Their role and responsibility is limited to that of giving advice and guidance.

A woman has complete freedom to accept or reject any proposal presented to her. The final decision to marry rests with her. The wisdom behind this is the low likelihood that a healthy family life will result when a marriage is conducted under duress, for this is an obstacle to what Allah demands of both spouses in their lives together: that is, that they foster mercy and compassion towards one another.

This position is attested to by numerous textual proofs. Al-Nisa'i records that a man married off his daughter to a man she disliked. So the daughter came to the Prophet (the peace and blessings of God be upon him) and said, "What if my father married me off to a man while I disliked this, and my cousin came to ask for my hand?" The Prophet responded, "There is no marriage [to the first man]. Marry whom you wish." [45] Similarly, al-Nisa'i relates on the authority of Khansa' bint Khadham that she said, "My father married me off against my will while I was a virgin, so I complained to the Prophet, and he said, 'Do not marry her off against her will.'"[46]

### Right to Divorce

Just as Islam gives women the right to choose her husband, it gives her the option to break off a marriage if matters worsen between them and there is no possibility of reconciliation. One of the erroneous conceptions about Islam is that men alone are given the prerogative to end a marriage. However, this is simply not true. This prerogative may be also had by the woman in several guises.

For one, she has complete freedom to stipulate into her marriage contract the right to divorce, and act upon that

45 Al–Nisa'i, al–Kubra, volume 3, page 282

46 Al–Nisa'i, al–Kubra, volume 3, page 282; also Al–Tabarani, al–Kabir, volume 24, page 251

agreement should differences between the two become irreconcilable. In such a case, she retains her full complement of related rights just as a man would if he divorced her.

Secondly, she may request an official separation from him on the basis of serious harm. If this turns out to be true, an Islamic judge may affect a separation between the spouses. In this case, too, she will be entitled to her full complement of related rights.

Finally, she may also initiate a *khul‘* divorce. In this case alone she will be entitled to a separation, but not some of the financial and other rights specified in the marriage contract, because of the lack of a demonstrable reason for ending the marriage. Because she has initiated the proceedings, she will have to forfeit some of her entitlements.

**Domestic Violence**

In a modern society in which a woman has access to education, and plays a crucial role in building and maintaining society, clinging to old-fashioned notions about disciplining women via violence does not make sense. Whereas this may have been customary in previous eras, using even minimal force is considered a violation and transgression. It is strongly recommended, therefore, that Muslim men today resort to other options to advise and correct their wives when familial discord occurs. As is mentioned in the Qur’anic verse, Allah asks the believers to advise them with good words, or to separate themselves from their wives sexually. Refraining from any sort of striking is closer to the meaning of Allah in this verse and in this context.

Even earlier jurists, in accordance with their understanding that the Qur’anic verse in question considered any sort of hitting as an absolute last resort after other measures had been exhausted, discouraged striking and severely restricted it. In

our context, however, we may go farther and say it is entirely inappropriate.

As with all matters, the Prophetic example is our ideal and our guide. When the women at the time of the Prophet found themselves being struck by their men, they went to him complaining about this. The Prophet became angry with his male Companions and insisted that they stop. The sunna of the Noble Prophet, therefore, is not only to refrain from such behavior, but indeed to urge others to stop and to discourage them from it.

## Polygamy

The subject of polygamy is regularly pointed to in an effort to demonstrate the failings of Islam and its lack of respect for women. In order to correct these misconceptions, it is necessary to point out that Islam did not invent polygamy but rather put limits on this custom that long predated the Message of the Prophet. Polygamy was common in the ancient world, but was mostly practiced without guidelines or limitations. The Sharī'ah circumscribed and legitimized this practice. Such legislation reveals the inventiveness of the Islamic legal system. For example, on the authority of his father, Salim narrates that Ghaylan ibn Salama al-Thaqafi had ten wives when he converted to Islam. The Messenger of God [s] told him, "Choose four from amongst them to keep."[47] The primary texts discussing polygamy are of this nature, meaning they limit the number of wives to four. There are no texts, however, commanding a man to marry more than one woman. Therefore, in Islam polygamy is not sought out without good reason. It is sought out for specific needs mentioned in conjunction with polygamy. For example, the famous Quranic verse says, "And if you fear that you will not deal fairly by the

47 Musnad Ahmad, volume 2, page 13; Sunan Ibn Maja, volume 1, page 628

orphans, marry of the women, who seem good to you, two or three or four; and if you fear that you cannot do justice [to so many] then one [only] or [the captives] that your right hands possess" (Al-Nisa:3). The exegetes of the Quran say that polygamy occurs in conjunction with situations involving widows and orphans. This meaning is entirely lost when contemporary examiners partially quote the verse and ignore the context of the discussion. The verse specifically speaks of orphans and widows, and uses an "if-then" clause to stress the conditional nature of polygamy. Many contemporary readers miss this; however, the Quran does not openly invite polygamy without conditions attached.

There is a huge difference between Islam commanding the marriage of four wives, as some claim today, and Islam bringing under strict legislation an already common and unfettered practice. If one delves into ancient history, it is common to read of rulers who had hundreds of wives, and of these same rulers giving wives to other rulers as gifts. Similar to Islam, Jewish law permitted men to marry more than one wife.

The intention of the Sharī'ah is to examine this practice and insure the marital rights of all spouses. Thus it is strange to hear detractors of Islam targeting polygamy, while ignoring other social phenomena that present a great threat to the unit of the family. Many non-Muslims in Western countries chastise Muslim polygamy, yet their own supposedly monogamous society is ridden with single-parent homes, depression, and high abortion rates. Adultery in the West is a type of polygamy occurring outside the institution of marriage. Both the legal wife and the mistresses of an adulterous man suffer. The man's entire family suffers, as his acts are a form of treachery and emotional abuse.

**Unequal Inheritance**

It is commonly stated in contemporary times that Islam oppresses women by making their inheritance half that of men. As Muslims, we have firm conviction in God's immutable attributes and this conviction keeps such claims from affecting our hearts. We believe that God is a fair judge and that His justice is absolute: no injustice towards humans or any other creature is found in His sacred law. The Quran says, "And your Lord wrongs no-one" (Al-Kahf: 49); "God is no oppressor of His servants" (Al-Hajj:10); and "It was not for God to wrong them (Al-'Ankabut:40). Therefore, such a statement does not shake our conviction, but rather calls for an in-depth analysis of the inheritance law stipulated by the Quran.

The difference in inheritance is not based on the gender of the heir, but on three primary conditions:

1. The degree of kinship to the deceased: Regardless of whether the heir is male or female, the closer the relationship to the deceased, the more an individual will inherit. For example, a deceased woman's daughter is entitled to half the inheritance while the husband of the deceased only receives one fourth. This is because the daughter, as an immediate blood relative, is closer in relation than the husband. Therefore the amount of inheritance she receives is greater.

2. The generation to which the heir belongs: Grandchildren usually receive more inheritance than grandparents because they will confront future financial responsibilities, whereas others usually maintain the financial upkeep of grandparents. The system functions this way regardless of gender: despite the fact that they are both women, the daughter of the deceased inherits more than the deceased's mother because they belong to different generations. Likewise, the daughter of the deceased inherits more than

the deceased's father. This is so even if she has a living brother who inherits with her.

3. Financial Responsibility: It is in this category alone that shares of inheritance differ according to gender. However, this disparity causes no injustice to the female. When a group of inheritors, such as the children of the deceased, are equal in the first two aforementioned factors, then their shares are affected by the third. In this specific scenario the misunderstood Quranic verses alluded to in the original question come into play. The Quran has not made the disparity between men and women a general condition, but rather has confined it to this specific situation. When the individuals in a group of heirs are equal in both their relation to the deceased and their age, the male son of the deceased receives twice as much as the female daughter of the deceased. The wisdom behind this arrangement is as follows: the male is responsible for the financial upkeep of his wife and children, whereas his sister's financial upkeep is the responsibility of an individual other than herself, such as her husband or father. Thus, for all practical purposes, the disparity favors the woman because the wealth she inherits is not applicable to the household expenses and is hers to dispense with as she pleases. This financial advantage also protects her from any circumstances that would place her in financial difficulty. Unfortunately, few today understand this finer point of the Muslim inheritance system.

   The financial responsibilities of men include the payment of a dowry, ongoing financial maintenance and support with no expectation of reciprocation, and financial support of their extended family if circumstances demand this.

These scenarios, and others, force us to conduct a more objective examination of property and wealth. Wealth is a broader concept than income. Income becomes part of wealth but is not wealth itself, since wealth is that which remains after

all expenditure. In the scenarios where a woman receives half of the man's inheritance, the woman's new income is protected by the Sharī'ah and is hers to dispense with as she wishes. The man's new income, on the other hand, is to aid him in supporting family members that have now come under his care. This is why we are able to say that Islamic inheritance laws protect the wealth of women and grant preference to them over men.

In other scenarios, men and women inherit the same amount. For example, the children of a deceased women inherit the same amount; as God says, "And if a man or a woman have a distant heir [having left neither parent nor child], and he [or she] have a brother or a sister [only on the mother's side] then to each of them twain [the brother and the sister] the sixth, and if they be more than two, then they shall be sharers in the third" (Al-Nisa':12). This equality of males and females in this case owes to the fact that they sprung from the same womb but do not share the same father. Sharing the same father would cause the male child to inherit the father's financial responsibilities, to the exclusion of the female child. In the situation explained above, the son does not have those financial burdens so therefore his sister is equally entitled.

## Marriage of Minors

A recent troubling trend on the rise in Egypt and elsewhere has been the number of marriages of girls under the age of minority, in contravention of recent Egyptian laws aimed at protecting children by stipulating that marriages of brides under the age of 18 are not to be solemnized. A number of cases have recently presented themselves of young girls being put on display, so that rich older men may choose from among them for purposes of marriage (often a temporary marriage), the parents of the girls being compensated financially as if this were simply an exchange of commodities. This is a dangerous

and troubling phenomenon, betraying the meaning of the Islamic conception of marriage.

Marriage is a sacred institution in Islam, based on love, mercy, and mutual respect. The sorts of arrangements mentioned above fail to live up to these ideals, and worse, compromise the dignity and humanity of young girls, treating them as slaves or chattel to be bought and sold. And this all for the sake of a suspect marriage disguising mere licentiousness, and more often than not leaving the marital rights of the girl unfulfilled. This is not a marriage worthy of the name, but rather a clear case of sexual exploitation which must be condemned in the strongest possible terms.

One of the most basic principles of Islamic law is the Prophetic command to neither inflict nor accept harm. Such deplorable cases not only cause individual harm to the young girl, but inflict harm also on the societal level. Islam has always sought to work for the welfare of the vulnerable and marginalized. When one considers minors, it is noteworthy to point out that the Sharī‘ah has given them full legal capacity over their economic assets. And in cases where there has been a legal guardian appointed, he or she is duty-bound to dispose of the minor's wealth only in ways that safeguard and advance the latter's welfare. It is of course evident, therefore, that the minor's welfare should be a primary concern in a matter as serious as marriage, for one's honor is certainly more sacred than one's wealth.

The jurists of Islam have long held that the values of love, mercy and mutual respect between the spouses can be best realized through considerations of compatibility between the two spouses. Many of them have deemed compatibility not simply a preference but rather a central value of the sharī'ah to be sought in all cases; indeed, a condition of the validity of an Islamic marriage.

The jurists have agreed that an extreme age difference is an important example of incompatibility. This is no small matter, for a father that fails to take such incompatibility into account is one who has lost his standing as a trustworthy and upstanding member of the community. And the jurists have stipulated that this standing is a requisite for his legal agency over his young daughter's affairs. There is no doubt that a man who engages in such sexual exploitation, and puts his daughter in such a precarious and dangerous situation, can in no way be considered a legitimate representative looking after her well-being and interests. Rather, he has not even fulfilled the least of his responsibility towards his humanity. As such, he forfeits his right to represent his daughter.

Based on this reasoning, the Mufti's position on this phenomenon has been to call for the criminalization of this sort of behavior, and the punishment of those who partake in it – be they parents of the girl, or intermediaries. Further, we must work to establish the true meaning of an Islamic marriage in our society, and restore the dignity and humanity of all members of our community.

## Chapter 6: On Muslim Minorities

Sheik Ali Gomaa's perspective on Muslim minorities is driven by the overriding imperative for Muslim populations to live in a convivial manner with other segments of society. The precise nature that this social conviviality takes depends largely on the dynamics between Muslims and non-Muslims in the various regions of the world, including their customs, political systems, and historical experiences. However, in what constitutes a significant advance with respect to the theory of Muslim minority populations, the Sheik has laid out a set of models derived from his reading of the Prophet's life (*sīra*), through which Muslim communities might understand their own particular situations in the contemporary world.

Dr. Ali is of the position that the classical legal dichotomy between a realm of Islam (*dar al-Islam*) and a realm of war (*dar al-harb*) is no longer applicable given the current arrangement of global politics. Inspired by the example of the Prophet in four distinct phases of the Muslim community during his lifetime, Dr. Ali suggests that we may instead understand Muslim belonging and community as following one of the following: the Meccan model, the Abyssinian model, the early Medinan model, and the later Medinan model.

The Meccan model recognizes that Muslims may well find themselves in a hostile society which seeks to oppress and marginalize them. Mecca during the early part of the Prophet's mission was characterized by indecency and low morality. The weak were taken advantage of by the strong, and discrimination based on class and race was rampant. The Muslims were in this context very few, and so they were called upon to exercise the virtue of patience, and to endure this difficult state of affairs.

In response to this situation, many Muslims emigrated to Abyssinia. Though also a non-Muslim nation, Muslims enjoyed the protection of the Abyssinian Negus, a Christian king, and were given the opportunity to practice their religion freely. This persisted despite the efforts of the Meccan enemies of Islam to dissuade the Negus from his tolerant ways. This presents a great example of religious communities living together in religious freedom, a true model of citizenship in which the relevant virtues are allegiance and participation in public life.

After the Prophet's migration, the early Medinan community consisted of Muslims, Jews, Hypocrites, and Pagans. Given this variety, the Prophet wrote what is sometimes known as the Constitution of Medina. This document was characterized by four major principles: a commitment to a peaceful and secure environment for all; a protection of religious freedom for all communities; open opportunity for public participation in the realms of the economy, politics and military; and an affirmation of individual responsibility. This example lays the groundwork for a "social contract," comprising a commitment to citizenship blind to religious and tribal differences, the codification of laws, and the writing of a constitution applicable to all.

Finally, the late Medinan model is one in which the Muslims dominated. However, it is incorrect to say that Medina had no diversity in this period. To the contrary, many texts point to the existence of Jews and Hypocrites who continued to live as normal citizens in the city-state of Medina. These individuals were treated with great justice in all matters, and found in Medina a fair and equitable government. Similarly, under the leadership of the Prophet, Medina initiated relations with other governments on the principle of fairness, justice and magnanimity.

These four models are, for Dr. Ali Gomaa, enduring Prophetic examples, for both individuals and states, on how to live with others. Either one or some hybrid of these will certainly apply to the situations encountered by contemporary Muslims, and can be adopted to guide Muslims' engagements with their societies. The role of contemporary jurists and leaders is to understand both the circumstances in their various locales and to deepen their understanding of the Prophetic biography so as to arrive at an approach which is most suitable for their constituents.

## Sheik Ali Gomaa, the West, and Muslim Minorities

Contacts between Sheik Ali Gomaa and the Muslim communities in the West have been multifaceted. They have included personal visits to the West; teaching and supervision of Western Muslim students; the provision of religious advice to Muslim minorities; and more generally an intellectual engagement with the West in its myriad forms.

For a scholar living in the $20^{th}$ and $21^{st}$ centuries, it is perhaps only natural that Sheik Ali Gomaa should dedicate a considerable amount of his time reflecting on the Western civilization, its internal dynamism and seemingly universal power. In his engagement with the West, Sheik Ali Gomaa has repeatedly emphasized that it should not be seen as a monolithic bloc. The challenge for the Grand Mufti lies precisely in making sense of the specific nature of Western civilization while taking its internal diversity into account. Sheik Ali Gomaa differentiates between five groups or components in the West: the first group is often hostile and motivated by a deep dislike and mistrust of Islam; the second is also hostile to Islam, but only because it is misled by the media; the third group is neutral and, being neutral, it is often surprised at the hatred directed against Muslims by some sections of Western society; the fourth group has Islamic sympathies and supports the just causes of Muslims; the fifth

group is itself Muslim, made up of converts and descendants of Muslim immigrants. The latter group is a recent phenomenon. Muslims in the West now number several millions; they are solicited by politicians and their voices impact decisively on election results in several Western countries. As Sheik Ali Gomaa points out, the current power of Western Muslims is unprecedented since the Fall of Granada.[48] The inclusion of Western Muslim communities into the conceptualization of the West demonstrates Sheik Ali Gomaa's willingness to think outside simplistic binaries. It is also symptomatic of Sheik Ali's interest in, and concern for, the situation of Muslims living in the West.

Sheik Ali Gomaa has had the good fortune of travelling widely across the world, from Japan and South Korea in the East to the USA in the West, covering over 50 countries in total. Thanks partly to the trust and support of Sheik Gad al-Haqq, who saw the promise of Sheik Ali's capacities early on, Ali Gomaa has since the early 1970s been part of official Al-Azhar delegations travelling abroad. Since 1980 – the date of his first trip to the United States – many of these travels have taken him to Western lands. Three decades of personal visits and experiences have made Sheik Ali familiar with the specific questions and dilemmas of Muslim communities established in Europe and North America. The contacts with the West have only intensified since 2003, when Sheik Ali Gomaa became Grand Mufti of Egypt. His official functions now lead him to travel regularly – sometimes twice a month – to countries in Europe and North America.[49]

As a Muslim scholar recognized for his mastery of the traditional Islamic sciences, Sheik Ali Gomaa is a much

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48 TV Program Kalimat Haqq, episode 30. Al-Gharb wa-l-Islam, January 2012.
49 Interview with Sheik Ali Gomaa, November 1st, 2011.

demanded and respected scholar amongst Muslims in the West. He has taught several batches of Western students – in particular from North America – who have travelled to Al-Azhar in search of the kind of embodied Islamic knowledge that is not limited to classrooms. Sheik Ali Gomaa's sermons at Sultan Hasan Mosque in Cairo in the late 1990s were religiously followed by a whole generation of Western Muslims. A number of them have since become imams, scholars, and professors of Islamic Studies in American universities in their own right. Sheik Ali Gomaa's revival of the traditional system of the *dars* (public lesson) was welcomed by those Western students of knowledge in search of the pure Islamic tradition. Indeed, many of the students enrolled at the Azhar University actively sought and attended Sheik Ali Gomaa's commentary of classical *usulī texts* in the 1990s and 2000s in mosques across Cairo.

Sheik Ali Gomaa's appeal for Muslims in the West is further enhanced by the Mufti's insistence that Islam is capable of engaging with the global concerns of Muslims worlwide, and by his unwillingness to discourse about Islam and the West as if they constituted two mutually-exclusive and competing fields.[50] His intellectual sophistication and his command of the English language have rendered the Mufti a privileged interlocutor of Muslim scholars and activists based in the West. These widely-recognized features of Sheik Ali, allied to his openness and accessibility, have also made the Mufti a much demanded partner in the Western academic, interfaith, media, and policy-making worlds. Such status is probably unparalleled in the world of Islamic academia today.

Given the interconnectedness of the current world, the Mufti has perhaps inevitably become one of the most prominent

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50 TV Program Kalimat Haqq, episode 30. Al-Gharb wa-l-Islam, January 2012.

voices of the ummah speaking authoritatively on Islam in the West. He is regularly asked to offer his own authoritative opinion and commentary on current events and future directions. In order to facilitate the access to Islamic knowledge for Muslim Diasporas, Sheik Ali Gomaa has supervised the transformation of Dār al-Iftā' into a truly global religious institution. Realizing the potential of new technologies, Sheik Ali Gomaa has turned Dār al-Iftā' into a multimedia institution answering questions from believers across the world in nine different languages (Arabic, English, French, German, Malay, Urdu, Turkish, Russian and Indonesian) by letter, telephone and the internet. He has also established a full-fledged department of translation within Dār al-Iftā'. The mufti training courses that Sheik Ali supervises at Dār al-Iftā' has helped equip students of knowledge from the West to the difficult task of fatwa-giving. In order to facilitate the training of students outside Egypt, Sheik Ali Gomaa has recently initiated plans to provide the same courses online via e-learning.

After the tragic events of 9/11 Sheik Ali Gomaa could not remain indifferent to the increasingly urgent nature of the questions being asked about Islam and Muslims living in the West. As the Mufti of Egypt, Sheik Ali Gomaa has intervened in global public debates about the Muslim presence in the West, the problematics of integration, and the root causes of Islamophobia. He has published opinion columns in the most prominent newspapers, such as the New York Times or the Washington Post, consistently outlining his moderate understanding of Islam. Sheik Ali Gomaa has sought to build bridges with Western partners, stressing the commonalities between Islam and Christianity, at a time marked by discourses on the clash of civilizations. Rather than attack, or defend, Sheik Ali Gomaa has repeatedly invited his

interlocutors to partake in a common word.[51] The Mufti urges Muslims and non-Muslims to work together in a common search for the beauty of the universe.[52] His contribution to interfaith dialogue is recognized at the highest level in the West. In a visit to Cairo, Jorge Sampaio, the High Representative of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, has personally expressed his appreciation of the Mufti's efforts in this field.[53]

Despite a hectic schedule, Sheik Ali Gomaa continues to support the participation of Dār al-Iftā' in conferences and meetings across the Western world in order to provide a counterbalance to the antagonistic discourse against Islam that has spread throughout the West – in particular in France, Belgium and the Netherlands.[54] In his official meetings with Ambassadors of Western countries in Egypt, the Mufti has expressed concern over the security of Muslims, notably after the murder of Marwa El-Sherbini in the German city of Dresden.[55] Sheik Ali has also encouraged governments to welcome the participation of Muslims and include them in positions of public office where Muslims can serve their countries. The Mufti has in this regard expressed appreciation for the recent efforts of the Obama administration.[56] He has above all demonstrated to the representatives of the world's nations his willingness to contribute to the spread of a culture of tolerance and moderation amongst Muslim minorities.

While offering his own advice when requested, Sheik Ali Gomaa has also emphasized the importance of dealing with local Muslims based in the West and more familiar with the

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51 TV Program Kalimat Haqq, episode 11. Islamophobia, 2011.
52 Ali Gomaa, Wa Qala al Imam, chapter .
53 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 10/4/2011.
54 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 25/10/2010.
55 Bayan Dar al–Ifta 17/3/2010.
56 Bayan Dar al–Ifta 6/5/2010

dynamics on the ground. Sheik Ali has stressed in particular the benefits of collegiality. In the wake of the protracted French debate on the Muslim headscarf, Sheik Ali Gomaa called in early 2004 for devising an integration protocol for Muslims in the West. This document should regulate the lives of Muslims in Western societies, providing guidelines for their integration in light of the principles of Human Rights and state religious neutrality. The protocol should be binding on all parties in order to prevent a repetition of the "minor matters" that have preoccupied Western public debate in recent times. All parties involved – statesmen, Western intellectuals, Muslims living in the West and the scholars of the ummah – should be involved in the drafting of the document. Sheik Ali Gomaa characteristically stressed that while Al-Azhar can play a consultative role in the project, the initiative should originate from the West itself.[57]

Sheik Ali Gomaa has expressed an appreciation of the religious freedoms offered to Muslims in the West. Although the Islamic view of religion and politics differs from the Western perception, Ali Gomaa recognizes that secularism has largely succeeded in establishing a pluralistic outlook conducing to spreading the message of Islam. The freedom of Muslims in the West to take up residence, practice their religion and express their beliefs openly implies that Western lands can no longer be described as *Dar al-Harb* (the land of war) or *Dar al-Kufr* (the land of disbelief).[58] At the same time, however, Sheik Ali Gomaa has called upon Western state authorities to deal pragmatically with religious issues that impact on politics. Rather than insisting on a principled separation between religion and politics, Ali Gomaa hopes that Western states recognize the complex interrelations between

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57 Hassan Mekki, "Egypt's Mufti Urges Integration Protocol for Muslims in the West", www.islamonline.net, 13/1/2004.
58 Ali Gomaa, Responding from Tradition, forthcoming.

the two spheres and work with Muslims to solve any problems that may arise in the process of integration of Muslims in Europe and North America.[59] In this regard, the Indian experience of managing religious diversity under a secular regime provides important lessons that might be reflected upon in the West.[60]

In 2006, the Mufti of Egypt proposed the organization of a conference gathering a broad spectrum of Western Muslim scholars to debate the issues of Islam in the West.[61] A few years later, in 2009, Sheik Ali Gomaa suggested the creation of a World Islamic Federation for Muslim Minority Affairs including representatives of all minority communities across the world. This Federation could act as a link between Muslim minorities and the official Islamic institutions in Muslim lands. Among its aims would be the protection of the Muslim identity, the dissemination of Islamic moderation (wasatiyya), and the provision of Sharīʻah solutions to the problems of Muslim minorities.[62]

Sheik Ali Gomaa's interest in the issues of Muslim minorities is not restricted to North American and Western Europe. As the Mufti made clear in a meeting with the Ambassador of Thailand in 2009, Dār al-Iftā' is willing to play its role in disseminating Islamic moderation and providing training for preachers of Muslim minorities across the world. At the request of the Ambassador of Thailand, Sheik Ali Gomaa accepted to cooperate in the establishment and administration of Sharīʻah courts for matters of personal status law in the south of Thailand. The Mufti furthermore welcomes Muslim students from Thailand (and other minority communities) to

59 Hassan Mekki, "Egypt's Mufti Urges Integration Protocol for Muslims in the West", www.islamonline.net, 13/1/2004.
60 Questions from America.
61 Questions from America.
62 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 22/7/2009.

enter into Dār al-Iftā''s three-year training programs after graduation from Al-Azhar.[63] This offer of training and collaboration has been replicated in a recent meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo. Sheik Ali Gomaa reiterated there his willingness to establish training programs, welcome Kosovar scholars to Egypt, and train their local muftis, with the aim of spreading Islamic moderation and protecting the religious identity of the Muslim community.[64]

Sheik Ali Gomaa has asked Western authorities to rely on trusted religious institutions such as Al-Azhar in their dealings with Muslims, rather than some self-proclaimed "Islamic scholars" who preach extremism.[65] He has repeatedly called upon Western countries to institutionalize Islamic religious authority in the West with the support of Al-Azhar in order to facilitate the participation of Muslims in the social life.[66] He has also followed closely efforts to institutionalize fatwa councils in the West, notably through the European Council for Fatwa and Research, and has accompanied the emerging reflection on what is known as *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt* (Muslim jurisprudence of minorities).[67]

Ali Gomaa agrees that Muslim minorities in the West may require particular fiqh solutions to their problems. This recognition, the Mufti points out, is not in itself new. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sheik 'Abd Al-Rahman Ilaysh suggested that there could be an interpretation of Islamic Law specifically designed for Muslim minorities, and that Western Muslim scholars might constitute in the future a new school of Islamic thought. Sheik Ilaysh's opinions are consonant with Sheik Ali's own views. Ali Gomaa has also

63 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 22/7/2009.
64 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 14/9/2011.
65 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 6/5/2010.
66 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 17/3/2010
67 Questions from America.

stressed the pioneering contributions to the development of an understanding of Islam rooted in the West by contemporary scholars such as Fathi Othman, Taha Jabir al-Alwani and ‘Abd al Hamid Abu Sulayman, as well as by European converts like Martin Lings, Rene Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, Muhammad Asad, and Jeffrey Lang.[68]

In his speeches geared towards Muslim minorities, Sheik Ali Gomaa has called upon them to integrate without assimilating and forgetting their Islamic roots.[69] The Mufti has emphasized the resourceful variety of historical models provided within the Islamic tradition. As pointed out ealier, The Mufti distinguishes in particular between four paradigms: Islam in Mecca before the Hijra; Islam in Abyssinia, Islam in the first Medinan period (pluralistic Medina with Jewish communities) and in the second Medinan period (Medina without Jewish communities). Each historical period provides particular lessons and wisdoms that can be appropriated by contemporary Muslims living in non-Muslim lands. For the Mufti of Egypt, the specificities of each historical period have had a formative impact on the Muslim personality, teaching him the values of patience (*al-sabr*), living harmoniously with the other (*al-ta‘āyush*), loyalty (*al-wafā’*), participation (*al-mushāraka*), openness (*al-infitāh*), cooperation (*al-ta‘āwun*), justice (‘*adl*), awareness of the affairs and the times (*al-wa‘i bi-l-sha’n wa-l-zaman*). Such values, Ali Gomaa contends, lie at the heart of the religion of God (Islam) in all times and places.[70] They must be productively engaged today by Muslims living as minorities in the contemporary world. This might be particularly true today, given the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the West. While Ali Gomaa does not deny the need to counter Islamophobic discourse, he constantly stresses

68 Questions from America.
69 Interview with Sheik Ali Gomaa, November 1st, 2011.
70 Wa Qala al–Imam (2010), p 216

the importance of following the Prophetic model of starting with oneself and of being patient.[71]

Sheik Ali Gomaa has also urged Muslims in the West to play the role of a bridge between civilizations (*al-wasat al-hadari*); to participate in Western societies by establishing institutions helping the poor and the needy; to be tolerant of religious diversity; and to fight extremism.[72] In his opening speech given at the 47th annual conference of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Sheik Ali Gomaa stressed the place of *rahma* (mercy) in Islam and argued authoritatively that Islam and Christianity share two fundamental values: love of God and love of the neighbor.[73] He has repeatedly advised Muslims (and non-Muslims) to distinguish between cultural practices and religious dogmas.

Given his standing as a recognized Muslim scholar and his position as the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheik Ali Gomaa has often been asked to deliver fatwas on issues facing Muslim minorities – at one point even collaborating directly with the Fiqh Council of North America. The bulk of the fatwas on Muslim minorities issued by the Mufti will be published in a separate volume in the middle of 2012. Some of Sheik Ali Gomaa's opinions – especially when dealing with controversial and pressing matters – have nevertheless been widely discussed. One such fatwa was related to the permissibility (or otherwise) of women leading the Friday prayer. Given the sociological dynamics of the Muslim communities in the West, Sheik Ali Gomaa expected that question to be asked sooner or later. In his answer he stressed that women praying behind man is not a form of degradation but rather a means of honoring women. While some have

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71 Kalimat Haqq 30, Al–Gharb wa–l–Islam, January 2012.
72 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 30/6/2010; Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 7/7/2010.
73 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 7/7/2010.

permitted women to lead the prayer under certain conditions, the majority have disallowed it, and it has never been the practice of the Muslim community.[74]

Another set of pressing issues for Muslims in the West relates to economic transactions involving usury or other factors usually prohibited in Islamic Law. Sheik Ali Gomaa has preferred to adopt the established Hanafi position permitting contracts in non-Muslim lands that would normally be prohibited in Muslim lands as long as they do not involve deception. While accepting the legal foundations of the Hanafi reasoning on this issue, Sheik Ali Gomaa has nevertheless made clear that the contemporary West must not be considered as a space of war (Dar al-Harb) since the religious freedoms granted to its current inhabitants make the situation totally different from the historical context in which the earlier Hanafi jurists wrote their treatises.[75]

## Misperceptions of Islam in the West

Sheik Ali Gomaa has taken a keen interest in solving the problem of misperceptions and misrepresentations of Islam in the West. Western scholarship on Islam, the media coverage of Muslims, and the flawed ideas disseminated by school textbooks in the West lie at the centre of Sheik Ali's efforts. In his capacity as the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheik Ali Gomaa has used his meetings with US and European officials in Cairo to urge Western authorities to correct the antagonistic descriptions of Islam contained in many school textbooks. Sheik Ali was personally involved in the production of a documentary on Islam to be shown to pupils in English schools. He has also cooperated with German scholars in the

74 "Al–Bayan", fatwa 13.
75 Ali Gomaa, Responding from Tradition, forthcoming.

development of Islamic curricula for German state schools, in particular in the state of Saxony.[76]

Along with a team of scholars, Sheik Ali Gomaa participated in a systematic study of – and response to – the questions and doubts (*shubuhāt*) raised by Westerners about Islam. No less than 40,000 issues of varying importance were identified. Sheik Ali Gomaa contributed to the detailed answers to these issues, fulfilling a collective obligation upon the ummah. The results were subsequently published in 28 volumes and remain a reference book for those interested. Unfortunately, as Sheik Ali Gomaa recognizes, these scholarly efforts seem to have a limited impact upon their intended readership.[77]

In terms of substance Sheik Ali perceptively identified four key areas of misunderstanding: the status of the Qur'an; the universality of the Islamic message; jihad; and the place of women in Islam. He has used every possibility available to him to correct these misperceptions. In an exchange facilitated by the Common Ground News Service (republished in the Egyptian daily newspaper Al-Ahram in spring 2006 under the title "Questions from America"), Sheik Ali Gomaa clarified his own positions regarding these four issues. In relation to the Holy Book of Islam, Sheik Ali Gomaa has emphasized the differences between the Qur'an and the sacred texts recognized by other religious traditions. Unlike the Qur'an, which was revealed in Arabic and has been preserved in its original form, other sacred scriptures have been edited, translated and otherwise revised. It is precisely the unchanging and eternal character of the Islamic Sacred Book that finds its authority in the eyes of Muslims. Ali Gomaa has also sought to reassure those non-Muslims who may view the status of the Qur'an as a problem by stressing that the absoluteness of the

76 Bayan Dar al Ifta, 27/7/2009.
77 Kalimat Haqq 11, Islamophobia, 2011.

Qur'an does not preclude interpretation, contrary to what is often believed in the West. The Islamic tradition distinguishes between equivocal and unequivocal verses.[78] Furthermore, out of some 6000 Qur'anic verses, only 300 deal with legal and ethical questions. 95% of the Qur'an is in fact concerned with the building of human character, establishing ethics, reason and spirituality.[79]

Sheik Ali Gomaa has repeatedly emphasized the universality of the Islamic message. Unlike most other religions, Islam is a religion which was sent – through the prophecy of Muhammad – to all of Mankind. This universality lies at the heart of the concept of the Muslim ummah, the community of believers, and helps to establish two kinds of bonds: the brotherhood in faith that unites all Muslims irrespective of nationality, ethnicity or status; and the brotherhood of the human species that unites human beings beyond religious affiliation.[80] The universality of the religion is also captured in the four historical paradigms of Islam: the Meccan period, the Abassynian period, and the first and second Medinan periods (see above).

Sheik Ali recognizes the great confusion that surrounds the Islamic concept of jihad. He categorically denies that Islam spread through the sword, or that jihad can be equated with Holy War. Drawing on the writings of the authors most likely to be recognized as neutral by his Western interlocutors – Orientalists such as Thomas Carlyle (On Heroes and Hero Worship), Gustave Le Bon (La civilisation des arabes) and Richard Bulliet – Ali Gomaa has shown that the dissemination of Islam across the world is due to persuasion rather than coercion. The conversion of local peoples was slow and

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78 Questions from America
79 Conference at John Hopkins
80 Questions from America, op. cit.

gradual, often taking place many centuries after the original Islamic conquest, thus demonstrating the famous Qur'anic dictum "there is no compulsion in Islam".

Sheik Ali Gomaa has also sought to respond in different fora to accusations that Islam degrades the status of women. Sheik Ali recognizes the complexity of the issue: some of the accusations are driven by ignorance, he argues; others result from real differences in the philosophical understanding of the place of women between Muslims and non-Muslims. Inheritance shares provide an instance of ignorance of Islam in the West. Rather than a proof of inequality between the sexes, Sheik Ali Gomaa points out that inheritance shares vary according to situation. In many instances, women receive more than, or the same as, their male relatives. Crucially, the inheritance in Islam is embedded in a comprehensive understanding of social rights and duties. The inequality of inheritance shares between brother and sister has to be seen in the context of their respective obligations. As Sheik Ali Gomaa points out, the male relative has the duty to support his wife, while the female relative has no financial obligations on her wealth.

Questions related to the headscarf, intermingling between the sexes, or physical disciplining of the wife present perhaps more intricate cases. Responding effectively to these questions from within the Islamic tradition and in a manner deemed to be understood by Western sensibilities requires a collaborative effort between Muslim scholars and activists (see for more details on the issue the chapter on women in this volume).

Sheik Ali Gomaa has dealt with other misconceptions of Islam in the West at different junctures of his life and work as the Grand Mufti. He has exercised every effort to correct this image problem and to promote the true understanding of Islam as a moderate religion. His condemnation of terrorism has been unequivocal. His fatwa on terrorism states categorically

that "Terrorism is the product of corrupt minds, hardened hearts, and arrogant egos, and corruption, destruction, and arrogance are unknown to the heart attached to the divine".[81] Sheik Ali Gomaa was one of the signatories of the Amman Message, a document produced in the Jordanian capital in 2005 outlining the required qualifications for issuing fatwas in Islam, and hailed in the media as making the global war on terror much easier to fight. More recently, Sheik Ali Gomaa has issued a statement in relation to the Fort Hood tragedy, insisting that the perpetrator of such acts does not represent Islam – a religion which considers human life to be sacred.[82]

Sheik Ali Gomaa has thus used his platforms and visits to demand that Westerners distinguish between Islam as a noble religion, and certain practices that are sensationalized in the media. He has repeatedly called for the establishment of clear guidelines supporting intercultural dialogue and combating Islamophobic discourse in the West.[83] Sheik Ali Gomaa has called upon Muslims to present the message of Islam in a deeper and more complete manner in order to fight stereotypes.[84] The Mufti has also stressed that dialogue, in order to be effective, requires an acceptance of the Other and a willingness to exchange ideas. Dialogue must therefore be distinguished from dissolution or assimilation into the Other's framework.[85]

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81 Al Bayan. See also chapter on extremism
82 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, no date.
83 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 25/10/2010.
84 Bayan Dar al–Ifta. 17/3/2010.
85 Bayan Dar al Ifta, 4/8/2010.

## Chapter 7: On Extremism

It is of no surprise to anyone that extremism and extremist violence are perhaps the most serious issues confronting civilization today. Recent years have only seen an exacerbation of these phenomena. The tragic events of 9/11 constitute but one high-profile example of the ongoing problem posed by extremist ideologies to the image of Islam and the future of intercultural and interreligious relations.

The Grand Mufti has been one of the most vocal proponents of the view that ideological extremism committed in the name of Islam is in fact a misreading of both the letter and spirit of the Islamic tradition, and an aberration from the great history of Islamic civilization.

In the view of Sheik Ali, there is no religion worthy of the name that does not regard as one of its highest values the sanctity of human life. Islam is no exception to this rule. Indeed, Allah has made this unequivocal in the Qur'an by emphasizing the gravity of the universal prohibition against murder, saying of the one who takes even one life that "it is as if he has killed all mankind."

Terrorism, therefore, cannot be for Dr. Ali the outcome of any proper understanding of religion. It is rather a manifestation of the immorality of people with cruel hearts, arrogant souls, and warped logic. The great corruption and instability sown by their actions are therefore a source of great sadness and outrage to him. What further complicates the matter, and exacerbates his concern is the way in which those who in no way understand or represent the grand Islamic traditions of tolerance, mercy and understanding have been able to link their repulsive actions with the noble religion of Islam.

Islam by its nature is a religion of moderation, not of extremes. In his famous saying, the Prophet of Islam advised Muslims to always choose the middle of the road on issues and not to seek extremes on either side. This moderation in religion means that one neither exaggerates, transgressing the limits set by God, nor does one neglect them altogether, thereby falling short of His expectations. While calling upon all Muslims to exercise moderation with all permissible things, Islam clearly and categorically rejects all forms of extremism, including *ghuluww* (excessiveness), *tanatu*‘(zealotry) and *tashaddud* (extreme practices). These forms of extremism do not find a home in Islamic teachings, because Islam recognizes that extremism is morally flawed and unproductive. It is against human nature, and has always been a short-lived phenomenon which does not work. From the perspective of human development, it does not leads to better human beings – physically, mentally or spiritually – though it does have the capacity to do serious harm to others, often those who are entirely undeserving of such attacks.

An example of this is the Islamic attitude towards wealth. On the one hand, Islam does not preach complete rejection of all worldly pleasures in view of the life hereafter. On the other hand, it teaches that this earthly life is not simply for pleasure and enjoyment. On the Islamic understanding, wealth and worldly pleasures can be partaken of in this life as long as they are enjoyed in a way that is in obedience to God.

Returning to the problem of terrorism, Dr. Ali maintains that the Qur’an is clear that “God has honored the children of Adam ... and distinguished them among our creation.” (Al-Isra’: 70). Islam therefore makes no distinction among races, ethnicities, or religions in its belief that all people are deserving of basic human dignity. Furthermore, Islam has laid down justice, peace and cooperation as the basic principles of interaction between religious communities, repeatedly advising Muslims that the proper conduct towards those who

do not show aggression towards the Muslims is to act with "goodness and justice." Indeed, this is the way of the truly observant Muslim, for "Allah loves the just."

Sheik Ali Gomaa has thus been a consistent and outspoken critic of violence of every form, and its erroneous and rootless affiliation with Islam. He has explicitly stated that terrorists are not Muslim activists, but outlaws who have been brainwashed and fed a mistaken interpretation of Quran and Sunnah.

For Dr. Ali, the epitome of Islam is mercy. He has previously said, "The Islam that we were taught in our youth is a religion that calls for peace and mercy," pointing to the first Prophetic tradition that is taught to a student of Islam: "Those who show mercy are shown mercy by the All-Merciful. Show mercy to those who are on earth and the One in the Heavens will show mercy to you." Another example is the famous Qur'anic verse which points to the nature and purpose of relations between Muslims and others: "O People! We have created you from a single male and female and divided you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another." From this, according to Dr. Ali, we understand that the purpose of creation is "to know one another," not to attack one another. All religions have forbidden the killing of innocents. Rather we have been ordered to cooperate in a constructive manner.

Islam established a moral and humanistic civilization that encompassed a plurality of religions, philosophies and worldviews which contributed immensely to the Muslim civilization. This cosmopolitanism does not allow Muslims to consider themselves superior to other people, maintains Dr. Ali. Though they may be proud of their history, Muslims must not reject other civilizations. Rather, all those who work towards the constructive development of the world should be considered partners. Muslims do not hate life, but rather seek to enhance and improve it for all. They do not seek to create

social imbalance, but rather encourage agreement and harmony. Anyone who goes against this, says Dr. Ali, has gone against the teachings of Islam.

This clear message should be obvious to all. However, in Dr. Ali's estimation, the problem faced by Muslims today – and indeed religious communities across the globe – relates to the issue of authority. In both Islam and other religions we are witnessing a phenomenon in which laypeople without a sound foundation in religious learning have attempted to set themselves up as religious authorities, even though they lack the scholarly qualifications for making valid interpretations of religious law and morality. In many cases, they have been facilitated in this by the proliferation of new media and irresponsibly sensationalistic journalism. It is this eccentric and rebellious attitude towards religion that clears the way for extremist interpretations of Islam that have no basis in reality. None of these extremists have been educated in Islam in genuine centers of Islamic learning. They are, rather, products of troubled environments and have subscribed to distorted and misguided interpretations of Islam that have no basis in traditional Islamic doctrine. Their aim is purely political – to create havoc and chaos in the world.

It must be understood, however, that these phenomena do not arise in a vacuum. The source of, and alleged justification for, much of the extremism and political violence across the Muslim world and beyond is the tragedy of Palestine, which remains unresolved for the past sixty years. In the opinion of Dr. Ali, we need to understand this complicated situation in order to work towards ending the daily bloodshed on both sides. As has been made clear repeatedly by Sheik Ali, Islam is utterly against extremism and terrorism, but unless we understand the factors that provide a rationalization for these phenomena we will never be able to eradicate this scourge. This basic fact must be understood and appreciated if we are to move towards building a better future that can bring an end to

this grave situation that poses such a serious danger to the world.

This evaluation is borne of his own personal experience, for before his appointment as the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr. Gomaa spent a good amount time with jailed extremists in Egypt and helped them through a process of rehabilitation, an effort that proved successful, especially since this group of prisoners were said to have completely renounced their extremist ideologies.

**Terrorism vs. Jihad**

Unfortunately, terrorists often invoke the Islamic concept of “jihad” to justify their crimes. This has led to much confusion and the tendency to misinterpret this important Islamic idea by linking it to violence and aggression. Dr. Ali has taken it upon himself to clarify this misconception.

Wrongly perceived as a synonym of “Holy War”, the word “Jihad” carries the broad meaning of struggle, and not necessarily armed struggle. It can be a Personal Jihad; which involves struggle against the inner-self and its inclination towards what is evil and harmful. Similarly, it can be a struggle for individuals’ rights and freedoms in a variety of ways.

Once, upon returning from a battle, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is narrated to have told his companions: “We have returned from the lesser Jihad to the greater Jihad; the Jihad of the soul.” Here, the term Jihad refers to the spiritual exercise of taming the lower self. And it is referred to as the greater Jihad, for people may spend their entire lives struggling against the base desires within themselves – desires that, if not overcome in a rational manner, may harm them and those around them.

To the contrary, the Islamic intellectual heritage is a repository for texts that clearly forbid murder while extolling the sanctity of human life, “We prescribed to the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul, unless it be for retaliation, or to spread corruption on earth, it would be as if he had killed all mankind, and whoever saves a life, it would be as if he had saved the life of all mankind.” (Qur’an- 5:32).

Also the Noble Prophet (PBUH) has clearly warned that, “The first cases to be adjudicated against on the Day of Judgment will be those of bloodshed.” And in another saying, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also warned that, “Whoever kills one (non-Muslim) under contract (of Muslim protection) will never smell the scent of Paradise.”

The military *jihad*, by contrast, is the antithesis of terrorism. It is a just war of the sort that can be found in every religious law and civil code. As the Qur’an says, “Fight in the way of God against those who fight against you, but avoid aggression for God does not like the aggressor.” “But if they cease [fighting], then God is Forgiving, Merciful.” This statement has been repeated many times throughout the second chapter of the Qur’an and forms the fundamental parameters for the Islamic law of warfare: namely, that it is permissible only for the purpose of repelling an attack, and protecting one’s self, one’s home and one’s family.

As can be expected, then, Dr. Ali maintains that terrorism does not come close to fulfilling any of the many conditions which are necessary for a just jihad. Among these is the insistence that war can only be launched upon the authorization of the Muslim ruler, after consultation with specialists and consultants. Vigilantism has been clearly forbidden throughout Muslim history.

Similarly, terrorism involves killing people and taking them by surprise. The Prophet has instructed, “A believer is not to kill

[others]. Faith is a deterrent to killing." Similarly, he has said, "A believer is not to attack [others] by surprise." Clearly, terrorists can only accomplish their goals by going against these Islamic teachings, which are fundamental to the type of chivalrous character Muslims must always exhibit, whether at wartime or during periods of peace.

As well, terrorism kills and harms women and children. A tradition of the Prophet relates that a woman was found dead in one of the battles. The Prophet found out about this, and thereupon forbade the killing of women and children both. Another phrasing of this hadith states: "The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) forbade killing women and children." The great scholar of Islam, Imam al-Nawawi commented on this: "There is a scholarly consensus on acting on this tradition as long as the women and children do not fight." It is clear once more that this is counter to the practice of terrorists.

As such, it is clearly a mistake to label the terrorists practitioners of *jihād*, or *mujahidīn*. This is a lofty Islamic concept which bears no resemblance to the lawlessness practiced by extremists and terrorists. But Dr. Ali is even more precise, arguing that the word commonly used in modern Arabic for terrorism, *irhab,* though an improvement, also poses its own set of problems. Indeed, *irhab* and the related Arabic root *r-h-b* often contain positive resonances for those conversant with the classical Islamic vocabulary.

As for example, the Qur'an uses a word in the semantic range spawned by *r-h-b* to explain the proper awe with which humans ought to relate to God. "O Children of Israel, remember my favor wherewith I favored you; and fulfill my covenant and I shall fulfill your covenant, and have **awe** of Me." (al-Baqara: 40). Relatedly, the Qur'an uses a related word (*rahban*) to refer to monks and monasticism (*rahbaniyya*), and their manner of interacting with the Divine. Finally, and more concretely, the root *r-h-b* is used to refer to

a praiseworthy deterrence against those enemies who would seek to aggressively intimidate the Muslim community. "Make ready for them whatever force you can and of horses tethered that you may thereby **awe** the enemy of God and your enemy." (Al-Anfal: 60). This term therefore is often used to refer to a concept of deterrence aimed at securing an advantage that will lead to peace with an enemy that would otherwise aggress against the Muslim community.[86]

As a commentator observes, the Grand Mufti instead favors the term *irjāf* as the proper translation into Arabic for terrorism. "This word, which denotes subversion and scaremongering to bring quaking and commotion to society is derived from the root *rajafa,* which means to quake, tremble, be in violent motion, convulse, or shake."[87] This term occurs in the Qur'an in this context in one telling verse: "Now; if the hypocrites do not give over, and those in whose hearts there is sickness and they **make commotion (*murjifūn*)** in the city, We shall assuredly urge thee against them." (Al-Ahzāb: 60). The reader of the Grand Mufti explains: "In the context of this verse, al-Qurtubī, the renowned thirteenth-century Qur'anic commentator and Malikī jurist, explains the meaning of *irjāf* with respect to "shaking of the hearts (*tahrīk al-qulūb*)," noting the root's corresponding application to "the shaking of the earth (*rajafat al-ard*)." Within an Islamic context, connecting this metaphor of creating commotion on earth (*murjifūn*) with that of shaking hearts (*tahrīk al-qulūb*) connotes that those who do wrong are in fact acting against the wishes of the Divine.

86 Ali Gomaa, Samat al-Asr (Dar al-Farouk: 2006), pages 131–132

87 Waleed El–Ansary, "Revisiting the Qur'anic Basis for the Use of War Language," in Crescent and Dove: Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam, ed. Qamar–ul Huda (United States Institute of Peace Press:2010), page 67.

Goma'a thus maintains that the term *murjifūn* (singular, *murjif*), as well as the equivalent rendering *irjāfiyyūn* (singular, *irjāfi*), is a far better translation of terrorists ... Of course, there are multiple ways to bring about such intense commotion to society, but all of these fall under *irjāf*, his recommended translation of the word terrorism. From a linguistic perspective, he points out that the term unambiguously connotes the cowardice, deceit, and betrayal associated with terrorism in striking from the back... The grand mufti's discussion of the usage of *murjifūn* not only deflates bin Laden's pompous and grandiose ideology, but reduces him from monk to criminal."[88]

This represents a rhetorical attack that must be used to deconstruct the terrorist ideology. However, the attack against extremism must also consist of a viable alternative. Here, the Grand Mufti believes we are on firm ground because it is clear that the puritanism and extremist readings maintained by the radicals represent unsustainable aberrations from traditional Egyptian Islam. Traditional Islam in Egypt and around the world is heavily invested in the purifying and correcting role of Sufism, the spirituality of Islam. Sufism is necessary for the proper refinement of morals and the creation of pure hearts and civilized humans who work towards developing and building human society, and not destroying it. Therefore, it is a necessary component of any project to curb extremism.

Another component is a rigorous intellectual response to the sorts of philosophical arguments made by the intellectually impoverished extremists. Here again we are fortunate in being able to draw on the long history of Al-Azhar, its timeless tradition of moderation (wasatiyya), and its widespread acceptance among the people.

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88 Ibid., pages 67–68

## Condemnations of terror and violence

Given his stance on the issue, it is of particular concern to witness the occasional episodes of sectarianism in Egypt. After the terrorist incident against Coptic churches in 2010, the Grand Mufti issued a strongly-worded statement, saying, "It is ... with great sadness and outrage that we witness the emergence of this disease in our nation with the recent bombing outside a church in Alexandria that killed tens of Egyptian citizens. There is no doubt that such barbarism needs to be denounced in the strongest of terms, and opposed at every turn.

"This act of terrorism was an affront to all Egyptians. It must not be used to sow discord in a country where Christians and Muslims have lived together in peace for centuries. It is vital for the peace of the region and wider world that the place of all religious communities and their full participation in society should continue to be fully protected and assured. We therefore welcome the firm resolve and assurances of all those in authority to make sure this will continue to happen.

"All Egyptians stand united against such behavior. Sectarian conflict is foreign to Egypt, and those who seek to use this as a pretext to stoke sectarian tensions need to be opposed in every way possible. At such a sensitive moment, we Egyptians must not participate in the spreading of rumors of such tensions. Rather, we must remain united to ensure that they do not become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and continue to treat each other with the goodness and respect that has long characterized Egyptian society. This is in the best tradition of both Christianity and Islam which call upon us to observe without

compromise the two great commandments to love God, and to love our neighbor."[89]

More important than simple condemnations, however, Dr. Ali maintains the strong belief that Muslims, and especially their religious leadership, must actively counter the deviant beliefs that underpin such gross transgressions. Despite their confused claims, terrorists are miscreants who have no legitimate connection to the pure Islamic way, whose history and orthodox doctrine are testaments to the Islamic commitment to tolerance, compassion and peace.

As is his position on all matters, Dr. Ali is insistent that the Prophetic example is the best of all models. The Prophet considered non-Muslims and Muslims as participating in a social contract which was inviolable. The promise of a Muslim is sacrosanct, for as he said, "Whoever unjustly persecutes one with whom he has an agreement, or short-changes his rights, or burdens him beyond his capacity, or takes something from him without his blessing, I myself will be an argument against him on the Day of Judgment." What sort of Muslim could it be, he asks, that not only deprives himself of the intercession of the Prophet of God in front of his Lord, but indeed puts himself at odds with him?

Nor can one attribute blame to the grand tradition of Islamic law as responsible for such repulsive actions, as we have seen above. As the Mufti stated in a speech in Zurich in 2010, it cannot be stated strongly enough that terrorism is opposed to everything Islamic law stands for. Islamic law is a sophisticated and humane system which mandates very precise

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89 Comment at the C–1 World Dialogue, "Terrorism cannot be the outcome of any proper understanding of Religion: Responding to Alexandria Church Bombing",
http://www.yale.edu/faith/ne/documents/GrandMuftiofEgyptWritesinresponsetotheAlexandriaAttack.pdf

rules for warfare. Those who undertake terrorist activities not only commit crimes against their victims – many of whom are innocent women and children -- and breach international agreements and treaties, but they overstep their boundaries, and place an unjustifiable burden on the rest of the Muslim community. As Grand Mufti, Sheik Ali has repeatedly condemned the senseless acts of terrorism carried out by those falsely claiming to represent Islam. These include unequivocal and express condemnations of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, the London bombings on 7/7/2005, the Bali terrorist attacks, as well as the recent shooting at Ford Hood.

As an example, consider the Grand Mufti’s comments in a speech given at Lancaster House, London, U.K. asserting the moderation of Islam, Dr. Ali, referring to the bombings that shook London in 2005, said:

“Almost two years ago the citizens of London were victims of a great atrocity. Those who perpetrated those crimes would like you to believe that they were inspired by the religion of Islam. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is nothing in Islam that could ever justify these blatant acts of aggression. Islam calls on Muslims to be productive members of whatever society they find themselves in. Islam embodies a flexibility that allows Muslims to do so without any internal or external conflict.”

In the estimation of Dr. Ali, the consequences of such actions are catastrophic, and will only lead to further bloodshed. Muslim leaders are therefore duty bound to continue to speak out against them loudly and clearly.

In an article titled “Refuting the Deviants' Claims”, Dr. Ali has provided guidelines for this undertaking to make clear the Islamic tradition’s strict and unequivocal condemnation of

radicalism. This can be encompassed in four simple and straight-forward points:

“The rise of extremism in the Muslim world has led to the widespread misconception that Islam is a religion of violence, retribution and warfare. This is in complete opposition to the truth of the noble faith of Islam. On behalf of the vast majority of the 1.5 billion Muslims who are balanced, peace-loving, decent people, I want to repudiate the actions of what I call misguided criminal minority.”

“Firstly, they contradict the concept of peace, the core and essence of Islam. Peace is the greeting of Muslims amongst themselves, the last word spoken by a Muslim in his prayers, one of God’s names, and one of the names of Paradise.”

“Secondly, Islam grants freedom of belief to mankind at large, as stipulated in the Qur’an: “To you is your religion and to me is mine.”

“Thirdly, the use of violence in spreading faith is strictly forbidden in Islam. The Qur’an explicitly states: “There is no compulsion in religion”, and “Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good counsel and discuss with them in the most kindly manner”.

“Also in the Qur’an, it is stated that “God does not prevent you from being kind to those who have not fought you on account of your religion or expelled you from your homes, nor from dealing justly with them, indeed God loves the just.”

“Fourthly and most importantly, none of those who adopted the extremist approach have been educated in credible centers of Islamic teachings. They are, rather, products of troubled environments, and their aim is purely political and has no religious foundation.

“Thus, terrorists are criminals, and shouldn’t be mistakenly described as Muslim activists.”

It can hardly be lost on anyone conversant with the current state of the Muslim world that this sort of approach is precisely what is needed to challenge the grave threats facing humanity as a whole in the modern world.

## Chapter 8: In Western Eyes

At times where extremist ideology is seen as the foremost specter splitting the world into two warring parties, the West and the Muslim world, what is required is an entire community of Muslim clerics, advocating for a balanced view and proper implementation of the Islamic doctrine- so as to try and reinstall harmony between the two poles of this ailing world.

Dr. Ali, known as "one of the most widely respected jurists in the Sunni Muslim world," has long been a staunch critic and opponent of extremist views and ideologies. Even before becoming the Grand Mufti of Egypt, he had started opening up channels of with the West on one hand and those who adopt extremist perception of the noble religion of Islam on the other, asserting his now widely acknowledged role as the master of moderation, strongly connected to the core challenges facing our modern times.

According to Dr Ali, the only way to establish harmony between the West and Muslims is to "fix the image that Westerners have of Islam by having the patience to endure their impatience and building bridges with them".[90] This sort of dialogue makes it possible for each side to "start to understand the other, to dissolve many of the barriers, and … correct their images of the other." However, this process fails "when each side tries to dominate and maneuver the dialogue in an attempt to control the other. That's when the dialogue loses its meaning."[91]

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90 The People's Mufti– Published in Egypt Today 2007
91 The People's Mufti– Published in Egypt Today 2007

Dr. Ali's views and balanced approaches have often made of him a controversial figure, and a target of those who adhere to radical thinking, due to their serious misinterpretations of Islam and its ideologies. Acknowledging the Sheik's courage and his effectiveness in seizing the discourse from the radicals, an article published in The Times in June 2007, stated that other voices of mainstream Islam "must now follow Dr. Gomaa's lead, and use the podium to denounce the radicals who have clouded so many of them."[92]

Having a comprehensive understanding of the changing needs of his age has earned Dr. Ali a special status among other Muslim intellectuals and reform thinkers. This is a necessary requirement in the eyes of Dr. Ali, for, in his own words, a mufti who is detached from the concerns of the modern world, is as a man "moving along a dark path with no light in his hand."[93]

In his Book titled *The Future of Islam*, John Esposito, a Georgetown University professor and well-known writer on Islam, provides a revelatory elucidation about a number of key challenges facing Muslims in modern times, highlighting the views of contemporary Muslim thinkers, including Dr. Ali Gomaa, whom he saw as the Modern face of Islam, figures capable of asserting a pragmatic application of the true message of Islam.

Esposito highlighted the eminent Imam's groundbreaking position on a Muslim who decides to change his faith, quoting Dr. Ali in a response published by the ''On Faith'' online forum of the Washington Post and Newsweek magazine, where he stated that God has granted freedom of faith to people, without placing any pressure upon them. In his

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92 The Times– June 2007
93 The People's Mufti – Published in Egypt Today 2007

remarks, Dr. Ali cited verses from the Holy Quran stating that Muslims are free to choose another religion. Although Islam considers this a major sin, individuals still have the freedom to choose. ‘‘The essential question before us is can a person who is Muslim choose a religion other than Islam? The answer can be found in the Quranic commandment ‘Unto you your religion, and unto me my religion,’ [Quran, 109:6], and, ‘Whosoever will, let him believe, and whosoever will, let him disbelieve,’ [Quran, 18:29], and, ‘There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is distinct from error,’ [Quran, 2: 256].’’ [94] But according to Imam Ali’s conception, choice means responsibility as much as it means freedom.

Emphasizing the modern approach of Dr. Ali’s religious discourse, Esposito continues explaining how Dr. Ali is essentially connected to the vibrant changes of our modern world, attesting to his wise method in extracting laws and issuing fatwas: “He carefully mines the tradition to find fresh legal responses to new situations and issues. In contrast to those who view the sacred sources of Islam and the principles of Islamic jurisprudence as fixed and unchanging, he believes that specific laws are conditioned by their historical context and subject to change. He is careful not to challenge the interpretations of major scholars of the past, but instead argues that current times and conditions render some interpretations unsuitable and require new solutions.”[95]

Further stressing Dr. Ali’s wisdom, Esposito quotes the Sheik as saying: “We hold the sources of knowledge sacred because we believe they are from God. So we cannot say that the legal questions produced by scholars are incorrect, but rather they were correct due to their relation to their time and place. . . .

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94 Response by Dr. Ali on ‘‘On Faith’’ online forum of the Washington Post and Newsweek magazine
95 The Future of Islam by John Esposito.

We hold a different opinion [today] due to the difference in time, place, persons, or conditions. From here stemmed the theory of the obligation of one's time, which means that every age carries with it a duty with which the scholars must be occupied. This duty changes with the change of time and conditions of the people. . . . While we believe legal questions may be constrained by their time or place, for example, we also believe they were correct for that time or that place, even if they are no longer suitable for our current times. From here came the rule that we respect the tradition but we do not hold it sacred, meaning by ‘‘tradition’’ the intellectual output of scholars and their scholastic efforts throughout the ages."[96]

This appraisal by Esposito is supported by Dr. Denis J. Sullivan, Professor of Political Science and Director of the Middle East Center for Peace, Culture and Development at Northeastern University in Boston. For Sullivan, the Grand Mufti "is a man of faith, a man of peace, a man of wisdom – a wisdom he shares with us all through his writings, *fatwas*, and sermons. Throughout these communications, the Grand Mufti confronts extremism in all forms and denounces violence and terrorism. He abhors sectarianism and promotes toleration and pluralism. Dr. Ali has an established record of defending women's rights, protecting human dignity and human rights, in particular the rights of the most vulnerable. He has taken a leading role in denouncing female genital mutilation, calling it deplorable, with no basis in the Islamic faith. In a similar vein, that of protection of young women, the Grand Mufti denounces the practice of marrying off young girls below the age of majority to older men in particular."

96 Muslim Americans: A National Portrait

Sullivan was also equally impressed by the worldwide influence of the moderate thinking espoused by the Grand Mufti. He found the Mufti to be “a very popular figure at home in Egypt as he is throughout the Arab and Muslim world, and the respect people have for him has only grown in the course of Egyptians’ struggle to build a new society and a new political system. The Grand Mufti is committed to ensuring that Al-Azhar retains the position of authority that it has enjoyed for over a millennium. He is equally committed to holding religious extremists at bay, and to holding Islamic values of justice, pluralism, honesty in governance, consultation and democracy.”

Another face of Sheik Ali’s contributions to society that is often overlooked is his continuous work towards the betterment of society as the head of charitable organizations. Dr. Sullivan in particular appreciated this facet of Dr. Gomaa’s life, calling him a “socially conscious entrepreneur, committed to poverty eradication, economic development, and environmental protection. He is a 21st Century man, respectful of science and reasoning, never straying from true Islamic traditions. It is this combination – faith, reason, science, and humanity – that, together, will help secure the *umma* (the Muslim community, worldwide) as it builds its future together.”

The most far-ranging engagement of the Mufti with the West is through his co-chairmanship of the C-1 dialogue, which seeks to find points of commonality and encourage cooperation between the Islamic and Western worlds. His co-chair in that capacity was the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, who remembers Sheik Ali as “an extraordinary ambassador totally loyal to his own religious calling and tradition and ambassador of the Egyptian culture in general, and yet with the ability to make relationships and to enter into dialogue in a creative and positive ways with people from other cultures.”

Bishop Chartres remembers his meetings with the Grand Mufti as a “meeting of minds which promises much for the new world that we will have to build together in this twenty-first century. It is a century of huge promise for the human race, but as we know also with huge perils as well. But with people like the Grand Mufti on this work, the promise and the hope is greatly enhanced.”

The Director-General of the C-1 World Dialogue, Alistair Macdonald-Radcliff, too, has expressed his appreciation for the efforts of Sheikh Ali. “I knew him when I was in Cairo as the Dean of the Cathedral serving with the primate bishop in the Middle East, Munir Anees… I can see the work of Dr. Gomaa not only through his work in Egypt where he had a great profile in engaging international religious leaders and other leaders but also engaging other faith traditions and addressing their concerns. This has a great importance for the future of Egypt as we see at the moment the future of Christian community in Egypt and the wider Middle East. As for international reach his convening power is very important, as is his ability to bring people together from different communities to engage very effectively with the practicalities and real challenges of dialogue.

… I also want to stress how much it has meant for the Christian community in the Middle East that he has shown the interest that he has in building better relationships on the ground in regard to shared issues which we can address of a practical nature.”

In particular, Mr. Macdonald-Radcliff has come to appreciate Sheikh Ali’s unique talents in the field of dialogue: “Dr. Ali has a rare appreciation of the real issues and the same time an ability to communicate, and that is terribly valuable to us because he can bring to the fore the issues that he sees as a major Muslim leader and one of the great authorities in the world, and at the same time address these issues in a way that

has an impact on the ground. It has to be said that it is not easy. To do that with integrity is very important but very challenging. You have to have the ability to communicate and also to raise the real issues as you see them and that has been one of the great strength of Dr. Ali's work."

Mr. Macdonald-Radcliff also went on to comment on the Grand Mufti`s participation in important dialogue projects, especially the Common Word Initiative. "Separately I just want to pay tribute to his commitment to the C-1. It has been a major commitment on his part to be the co- chair … One of the areas that I think has been particularly important is to build on the Common Word initiative, as one of the great strengths of the Common Word is that it built a theological platform of practical cooperation. It asks the question of how in practical ways we can love neighbors by pointing out we have two great commandments to fulfill to love god and our neighbor. I think the moral of how we should love our neighbor in a practical way is to look at issues of shared concerns that we can address together. That is a really practical way in which the rhetoric of cooperation and harmony and all the good things that we think of as embodied in dialogue can be given an effect and actually have an impact in the world. [This] has a further virtue: that people find when they work together on an issue of a shared concern that they feel much greater bonds of unity and therefore I think that is a key thing for us to take forward in the future as we look at the role of dialogue and how we give it more impact. How can we work together better in local communities at mosques, churches and synagogues on issues that engage us and of practical concern upon which we can unite in a collective action?"

This emphasis on dialogue has been echoed by Professor David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, whose experience with the Grand Mufti led him to see him as a man "who knew how to think about the great issues of our time both religiously and politically" and

"somebody who knows that [for true dialogue] you have to be prepared to go deeper into your own faith as well as the other's faith at the same time."

Professor Ford expressed his deep appreciation for the Grand Mufti's engagement with the Egyptian Coptic community: "I would like to mention one that I have the privilege of seeing in close quarters that between archbishop Munir in Cairo and Dr. Ali Gomaa these are two people who traveled together and see each other frequently, who have communicated on very sensitive matters and faced very sensitive situations and I myself have very much hope that both of them will have a long fruitful future in engaging with the issues between Christianity and Islam."

Professor Ford went on to detail the great impact the Grand Mufti has already had on the C-1 World Dialogue and the Coexist Foundation: "One venue in which I had a good deal to do with Dr. Gomaa is the C-1 world dialogue which is a remarkable body which engages in the after math of the Common Word with a wide range of spheres internationally of business life, education, the media and communities among other spheres and it has been Dr. Gomaa's ability to be a statesman to bring together people who are very diverse yet not bringing vacuous and emptiness. There is always some worthwhile content and that is on the public side so to speak but on the other side behind the scenes I know he has done an immense amount of effort not the least for interfaith matters, one area that I know and few other people know that he is the trustee of Coexist foundation and that is a very imaginative enterprising body which has a head quarter in London and it supports a range of interfaith activities…

There is a great feeling of reliability about the foundation which is owed to the fact that there is such fine body of trustees including Dr. Ali behind the scenes and what they have sponsored is just beginning to be evident and the fruits of

what this foundation has done will be shown more and more in the years to come."

Like Alistair Macdonald-Radcliff , Dr. Ford also praised Sheik Ali's role in the Common Word Initiative: "I had some good friends involved in the genesis of [the Initiative] and they all agreed on how vital Dr. Ali Gomaa's contribution was, and how he had done so much of the coordination. And the crucial blessing of that letter was that it was introduced to a wide unprecedented range of Muslim leaders who came together to sign it and in the years that followed the Common Word initiative, he has been in the core group that made sure that it has been followed through in a diverse way, and especially to my Anglican church and the Roman Catholic church and the Royal Council of churches and many others.

My next engagement [with the Mufti] was in relation to a common word when we held a conference in Cambridge jointly with the archbishop of Canterbury in October 2008 in Lambeth Palace. I had spent time with him talking with him about many things, and I was immensely grateful for his contribution both in public and behind the scenes to the discussion that produced such a valuable communiqué and the emphasis on the importance of the scriptures of Christianity and the Quran for the engagement of the two faiths. And when he did the final press conference in Lambeth Palace with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, I remember thinking how the two of them had come to a remarkable agreement not just in the content of what went in that communiqué but also the tone and the generosity of it."

Professor Ford was equally impressed by the way in which Sheik Ali dialogued with his own Muslim coreligionists. "Also at the same visit he addressed a large gathering of Muslim students in Cambridge and I was in this engagement. And he spoke to them for a while. Then he opened himself to questions and the questions came very fast and furious and

they were on a range of very difficult issues and I saw how he dealt with his own Muslim community, but a community that was made of Muslims from a very wide variety of countries. Many of them are either teaching in Cambridge or doing doctorates or undergraduate degrees and the one thing that stood out was his emphasis that in part of his own crucial chain of teachers and predecessors, there were women quite a long way back. And he expressed hope that there would be women in this chain again so women major teachers in Islam can take a proper part in their tradition which they had done some centuries previously but not always in the intervening centuries."

Indeed, Dr. Ali has long been an adamant advocate of gender equality and respect for women, speaking up for their right to education and against the brutal practice of genital circumcision, among other matters. As Professor Esposito notes, "Sheik Gomaa, also stresses a woman's right to education and to a profession, as well as her unequivocal right to choose her spouse (rejecting the idea that a father has any prerogative over his daughter's choice)."

As well, the Grand Mufti issued a trailblazing fatwa in 2007 as noted by Esposito: "Ali Gomaa's February 2007 fatwa affirming women as leaders of nations reveals his neo-traditionalist methodology as well as his rationale for modern reform, both of which generate controversy. After the leading Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram reported that Gomaa had prohibited female presidents, he charged that they had distorted his position. Distinguishing between a modern president and a ''traditional ruler or caliph . . . the supreme leader of the Muslims,'' he maintained that the reasons given by the earliest Muslim jurists for why a woman was not capable of assuming the office of caliph ''clearly show us that

the office of caliph is very different to our present concept of a president.’’[97]

As is well known, the Grand Mufti has been a strong critic of extremism, as noted by *The New Yorker*, “His forceful condemnations of extreme forms of Islam have made him an object of hatred among Islamists and an icon among progressives, whose voices have been overpowered by the thunder of the radicals.”[98] Yet, in doing so he has adopted a wise approach, embracing discussion with extremists whenever possible. As quoted in the same article, the Grand Mufti explains this process:

“I began going into the prisons in the nineteen-nineties,” he told me. “We had debates and dialogues with the prisoners, which continued for more than three years. Such debates became the nucleus for the revisionist thinking.”

Before the revisions were published, Gomaa reviewed them. “We accept the revisions conditionally, not as the true teachings of Islam but with the understanding that this process is like medicine for a particular time,” he said. The fact that the prisoners were painfully re-examining their thinking struck him as progress enough. “Terrorism springs from rigidity, and rigidity from literalism,” he said. Each concept is a circle within a circle, and just getting a person to inch away from the center was a victory. “Our experience with such people is that it is very difficult to move them two or three degrees from where they are,” he said. “It’s easier to move from terrorism to extremism or from extremism to rigidity. We have not come

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97 The Future of Islam, John Esposito

98 Lawrence Wright, “The Rebellion Within.” The New Yorker, June 2, 2008.

across the person who can be moved all the way from terrorism to a normal life"[99]

Upon the issuance of a "controversial" fatwa which simply relayed the Islamic prohibition on the production or display of sculptures, Dr. Ali came under attack by many who thought that such a view returns people to a more primitive age and invites extremists to attack the country's ancient relics, wreaking havoc on Egypt's monument wealth.

Jay Tolson, a senior writer at U.S. News, offered an accurate assessment of the matter which amounts to a defense of the Grand Mufti's position and track record: "While Gomaa did say that it was un-Islamic for Muslims to own statues or to display them in their homes, he made it very clear that the destruction of antiquities and other statues in the public sphere was unacceptable and indeed criminal. He is also on record deploring the Taliban's destruction of the great Buddhist statuary in Afghanistan."[100] This asserts the Grand Mufti's evident inclination towards moderation. All the while, he refuses to compromise with respect to the commands of God's revelation; however nor does he render himself vulnerable to charges of endangering the order and well-being of societies.

To the contrary, Dr. Ali is known for his sincere love for the people and his deep spiritual bond with his audiences. He has become a popular figure and attendees of his lectures, becoming a popular figure, often referred as the "People's Mufti." [101] Even though he considers himself a traditional scholar, he has repeatedly ventured far beyond the

99 Lawrence Wright, "The Rebellion Within." The New Yorker, June 2, 2008.
100 Excerpt from "Finding the Voices of Moderate Islam", by Jay Tolson, US News , April 2, 2008
101 Egypt Today– October 2007

conventional boundaries of classical clerics, taking advantage of every opportunity to help, educate and present the moderate Islamic worldview to people. To increase his effectiveness, he has adapted to new technologies in an attempt to harness its power, and use it to better fulfill his mission. As Tolson notes, the Grand Mufti "is an energetic and media-savvy man. His own office has a call center and website, with about 40 muftis on hand to answer more than 1,000 queries a day. He continues to teach every Friday at a busy mosque, fielding questions from all comers, and he is a frequent guest on radio and TV talk shows. "[102] These new media initiatives simply cemented the bond Dr. Ali already had with the Egyptian people, thereby further facilitating his discourse of moderation and balance.

102 "Meeting Egypt's Grand Mufti" by Jay Tolson– US News, February 2008

## Chapter 9: Intellectual Output and Contributions

Despite Dr. Ali Gomaa’s many engagements and multifaceted interests, his primary vocation from an early age, and indeed his greatest love to this day, is as a scholar, researcher and writer. His ardent desire for knowledge has led him to engage in academic activities from the very beginning of his career. This includes a distinguished writing career that has spanned almost forty years. In many ways, this is Sheik Ali’s life’s work, in which he makes available his vast learning, his acute awareness of contemporary affairs, and a unique methodological approach to future generations.

Dr. Ali has written more than 70 works spanning the many disciplines of Islamic thought. (A summary of many of these works is given below.) These are addressed to a variety of audiences – students of the Islamic sciences, Muslims in general, non-Muslim communities – and regularly touch on pressing contemporary issues. These books remain very popular, and are often sold in the hundreds of thousands, revealing both the Muslim public’s deep appreciation for scholars, scholarship and the opportunity to learn about their religion, as well as the Sheik’s special gift for reaching out to the people and communicating with them in an appealing manner.

### JURISTIC METHODOLOGY (*Usūl al-Fiqh*)

Dr. Ali has dedicated twelve books to discussing a range of issues pertinent to the science of Juristic Methodology (***Usūl al-Fiqh***). The science of juristic methodology is of central importance to the Islamic intellectual tradition, being the science which establishes the appropriate manner of dealing with the Islamic texts. Its function is to establish a precise methodology by which to comprehend, interpret and extract

general collective rulings which can be utilized as guidelines to apply to different branches of jurisprudence. A proper methodology is a requisite feature of scientific research for anyone keen to alienate himself from myth and subjectivity in an attempt to approach objectivity in theory and application.

Part of this search for precision and objectivity is the great stress Dr. Ali places on defining terminology. Because he believes that far too many misunderstandings stem from the inability to define terms correctly, he has dedicated a whole book to the issue of defining "the juristic ruling," entitled ***The Juristic Ruling According to the Scholars of Juristic Methodology (al- Hukm al-Shar'ī 'Ind al Usuliyīn).***

This is related to his work in ***The Issue of Terminology in the Science of Juristic Methodology: The Case Study of Analogical Deduction (Qadeyat al- Mustalah al-Usūli ma'a al-Tatbīq 'ala Sharh al-Qiyās)***, in which he re-emphasizes the importance of defining terms correctly, and takes up as a case study the definition of the central jurisprudential concept of "juristic analogy". A more in-depth treatment of "analogy" can be found in his ***Analogy According to Scholars of Juristic Methodology (Al-Qiyās 'inda al Usuliyīn),*** where he dedicates four chapters to explaining the historical role of the concept, defining it, and outlining the scholarly debates on it among different juristic scholars. In a continuation of his discussion on this topic, Dr. Ali takes the arguments surrounding juristic analogy to a higher level in tackling the crucial research question of the possibility of contradiction between different juristic analogies in his book titled ***Conflicting Analogies According to the Scholars of Juristic Methodology (Ta'ārud al-Aqyisah'inda al-Usuliyīn).*** The book is a valuable addition to modern Islamic jurisprudential literature, and indeed an essential reference for students of Principles of Islamic Sharī'ah and those generally interested in the discipline.

Similarly, Dr. Ali places huge importance on another of the primary tools of Islamic jurisprudence, namely *ijmā'*or "consensus". His book titled ***Consensus According to the Scholars of Juristic Methodology (al-ijmā' 'inda al-Usuliyīn)*** explains the key role that *ijmā'* once played in the integration of the Muslim community and safeguarding of Muslim identity, and its essential role in the Islamic discourse of passing along central tenets from one generation to the next.

Dr. Ali is known for having the intellectual capacity to penetrate through intricate scholarly issues which cause huge controversy among scholars, whether classical or modern. One such controversial topic which has always given rise to uproar is the issue of abrogation in the Quran. He discussed this issue at length in his book titled ***al-Naskh 'inda al-Usuliyīn (Abrogation According to Scholars of Juristic Methodology)***, taking the reader into the midst of the disagreements of scholars and their different opinions on the issue, before arriving at his own conclusions.

Another controversial issue which has historically been the cause of many debates is the authoritativeness of the statements of the companions of the Prophet. In his book titled ***The Statement of the Companion According to the Scholars of Juristic Methodology (Qawl al-Sahab*ī *'inda al-Usuliyīn).*** This is a sophisticated research work, which penetrates deeply into the issue under question.

Another hotly-debated issue in the quest for arriving at Islamic rulings is that of visions and their impact on the science of Juristic rulings. In his book ***The Evidentiary Weight of Visions According to Scholars of Juristic Methodology (Mada Hujjiyat al-Ruya 'inda al-Usuliyīn)***. This work is recognized as a landmark investigation in the field of Juristic Methodology.

Moving to another topic that has a great impact on juristic rulings, Dr. Ali discusses the issue of linguistic commands and prohibitions in the Islamic text. In his book titled ***Commands and Prohibitions According to the Scholars of Juristic Methodology (al-Awamir wa al-Nawahī ‘inda al-Usuliyīn)***, Dr. Ali focuses on the manner of reading the Islamic texts and the methods of understanding the denotations of imperatives and prohibitions found therein.

Dr. Ali is known for his passion for reviving Islamic sciences and disciplines, and has spoken in detail about the subject with respect to the reviving the science of Juristic Methodology in his book titled ***The Issue of Reviving Juristic Methodology (Qadeyat Tajdīd Usūl al-Fiqh).*** The book lays out the many different approaches to the idea of renewal so as to allow researchers to critically analyze all these theories and reach their own conclusions about the issue.

Dr. Ali is, however, not merely interested in the nitty-gritty details of the science of Juristic Methodology. Instead, he is well known for his broad vision and keenness to establish scientific paradigms and define the governing relationship between different sciences. His insightful intellectual output and rich scholarly writing in the field of Juristic Methodology has been concerned not only with defining the science of Juristic Methodology and discussing its various constitutive issues, but has gone further to tackle the relevance of this science to the very fundamental premises of Islamic philosophy. His monograph on this issue titled ***Juristic Methodology and its Connection to Islamic Philosophy*** was first published in 1996. His position is that the procedures and tools utilized in this science are not stand-alone phenomena, but rather stem from an all encompassing vision which touches on the fundamental questions discussed in Islamic philosophy and theology. The three fundamental themes of the latter disciplines are the issue of existence (including the existence of God, man and the universe); epistemology, with its close

relationship to the field of logic; and the issue of values such as aesthetic and morality. Islamic philosophy is therefore the backbone and forms the fundamental background for the investigations of Juristic Methodology.

## PROPHET MUHAMMAD

Dr. Ali has dedicated different books, Friday sermons and TV programs to an analysis of the Prophet's life, and how Muslims can follow his footsteps on the path of mercy and compassion. When reading Dr. Ali's books on the Prophet, one cannot help but sense the strong feeling of love and awe that Dr. Ali holds for the beloved Prophet. This is apparent in many of his works, such as ***Practice Love: The Love in the Prophet's Life (Hakemo al Hub).*** In this work, Dr. Ali emphasizes that the life story of the Prophet is not about a man who lived and died 1400 years ago with no impact on the Muslim's life today. Rather, he was a man who embodied love and compassion in everything he did, and this love continues to define his legacy for Muslims today. Although they do not enjoy the visual presence of the Prophet, his story fills their hearts with yearning and longing to meet their beloved Prophet in the afterlife, and his behavior and actions guide their modern lives.

Dr. Ali has always been keen to introduce the Prophetic experience to the world and for this purpose he wrote a book titled ***Who is Your Prophet (Man Nabeyyak)***, recently published under the title ***of Know Your Prophet (E'raf Nabeyyak).*** This book, a narration and discussion of the blessed life of the Prophet, was written to honor the anniversary of the Prophet's birth. Dr. Ali was motivated to reintroduce Prophet Muhammad to the world because of the need he felt to focus on the morals and guidance of the Prophet in today's world. Non Muslims might wonder how a man who died 1400 years ago, no matter how great he was, still enjoys such great reverence among Muslims to our

present time. Dr. Ali responds to that by saying that this is one of the characteristics of the Prophet's message as he is the last messenger of God so his memory is constant in our minds with no fading or erasing.

Dr. Ali wrote another book on the Prophet titled ***Prophet Muhammad: God's Messenger to All Worlds (Sayyiduna Muhammad: Rasul Allah Ila al-'Alamīn)***. Divided into two main sections, the book provides a biography of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), offering some detailed description of his physical attributes and virtues which were carefully transmitted as has been Islamic tradition from time immemorial. The book also depicts the Sunnah or the model of the Prophet what constitutes it and how it has been preserved over the centuries of Islamic history.

In addition to his written works, Dr. Ali dedicated 22 Friday sermons at the Sultan Hassan Mosque to depicting the noble life of Prophet Muhammad and how Muslims relate to him in their everyday lives, looking up to him as their sole role model. This collection was combined in a book titled ***The Prophet, May the Peace and Blessings of God Be Upon Him (Al-Nabi Salla Allah Alayhi Wa Sallam).***

**SUFISM**

Dr. Ali is known for his Sufi writings and his passion for going beyond the surface level of worship and the associated juristic rulings, to penetrate instead through to its deep and profound meanings. This was clearly shown in a series of lectures he delivered on the inner secrets of worship, later combined into a book titled ***Lectures on the Sufi Jurisprudence with respect to Practical Legal Rulings (Mohādarāt fī al-Fiqh al-Sufī le al Ahkām al-Shari'iyah al 'amaleyah).*** The aim of Dr. Ali in this series of lectures is to convey the importance of understanding the essence of worship, namely presence of heart, without which worship

would turn into mere mechanical rituals, done by habit and hollow of meaning. These hollow habits turn rituals to merely appearances and images, void of meaning and null in the sight of God.

For those who are keen to be active wayfarers on the road to God, Dr. Ali wrote an indispensible commentary titled ***The Path for Beginners in Explaining the Beginnings of the Stations of the Travelers to God (Sabīl al-Mobtad'īn fī Sharh al-Bedayat men Manāzel Al Sā'erīn).*** This is a commentary on the classical book of Sheik al- Harawī in which he explains in detail the spiritual stations (*maqāms*) of the wayfarer to God, the detailed steps which guide the wayfarer to elevate his spiritual status and find his way back to the divine presence of God.

In our fast paced life, we sometimes tend to forget about conversing with God and imploring him to walk us through our lives especially at times of torment and ordeals. Moreover in our busy schedule we don't put much weight to the issue of remembering God with our tongues or hearts. Dr. Ali delves deeply into this issue to help us understand the power of supplication and the intensity of remembering God. He dedicated a series of Friday sermons to deal extensively with this issue. These sermons were later compiled as ***Supplication and Remembrance (al Du'ā' wa al-Dhizkr).*** In this book, Dr. Ali takes the Prophetic example as guidance, describing how the Prophet was in a constant state of remembrance and conversation with God, both within ritual worship and outside of it.

A related issue which has the potential to become an obstacle in the wayfarer's road to God is the issue of sins. Dr. Ali delved into this matter in his book titled ***Steps to Abandoning Sins (Khotowāt al-Khorūj men al-Ma'āsī).*** Dr. Ali explained that sins are veils that deprive the heart from having a direct spiritual connection with God. The sinner walks blind folded

by his sins, he trips over and falls into a state of total heedlessness in which he indulges in sins and pays no attention to the aftermath of his wrong doings. God reaches out to people and calls them back to him by offering them repentance. This is considered the first step in one's journey to find his way back to God. Repentance for Muslims is an ongoing process which helps the person in his spiritual ascension to God. The Prophet asked the Muslims to repent continuously, as he himself sought God's forgiveness a hundred times a day. The Prophet had a larger aim in giving the Muslims this advice, as it is considered a higher philosophy against sinking into despair and becoming weary of carrying around the burden of the past into the future.

Realizing the importance of the practical steps for the one treading the path to God, Dr. Ali delivered a series of Friday sermons tackling this issue which were later combined into a book titled ***Moral Training and Behavior (al-Tarbiyah wa-al-Sulūk).*** The forty-nine lectures tackle a variety of topics and discuss the ideal Muslim behavior and its primary characteristics.

Dr. Ali in 2001 delivered a series of lectures which turned into a collection of transcribed lessons tackling Sufism under the title ***The Path to God (al-Tarīq ila Allah).*** The lectures start off with a discussion of the famous Hadith of Jibril and situate Sufism as the doctrine referred to by the noble Prophet (PBUH) when he described *"ihsān"* or excellence as worshipping God as if one is seeing Him. The rest of the lectures depict many characteristics and views of Sufism including spiritual seclusion and the levels of the soul.

## QURANIC SCIENCES

The Quran occupies a place of high reverence among Muslims, being the primary source of Islamic legislation and the final testament of God from heaven to earth. For this

reason Dr. Ali has dedicated more than 400 pages to interpreting the opening chapter of the Quran, *al-Fatiha*, and the first quarter of the second chapter, *al-Baqarah*, in a book titled ***The Torch for the Exegesis of the Quran (al-Nibrās fī Tafīsr al-Quran).*** In this book, Dr. Ali explains the miraculous nature of the Quran and its exegesis. He explains that many Muslim scholars have throughout history spent their entire lives mining the endless gems of the Quran and discovering ever-new meanings.

Along the same lines, Dr. Ali delivered a series of Friday sermons at the Sultan Hassan Mosque. This transcribed collection was combined under the title ***Revelation: The Quran (al-Wahi: al- Quran al-Karīm).*** The 27 sermons tackle the concept of revelation, shedding light on how Muslims relate to the Quran in all matters of life.

## FATWAS

The growing popularity of satellite channels, especially Islamic Satellite Channels has given both rise and exposure to inaccurate and sometimes erroneous fatwas issued by self-claimed scholars who fail to meet the requirements of a Mufti, authorized to issue religious edicts. To address this crucial challenge facing Muslims worldwide and in order to protect them against such ambiguous and faulty fatwas, the Grand Mufti found it imperative to publish a book titled ***The Craft of Fatwa (Sinā'at al-Fatwa)*** clearing much of the confusion clouding the issue of Fatwa, who is eligible to issue fatwas, and the proper etiquette and procedure for doing so. Imam Ali has always held and promoted the view that fatwas or religious edicts should be issued strictly by distinguished scholars who act as a source of guidance to Muslims.

Dr. Ali is renowned for having the ability in his fatwas to combine between a mastery of the science of jurisprudence and its suitable application to fit the lived reality of people. He

has addressed questions and concerns of viewers through the Q&A sessions that are held at the end of the weekly TV program *Al Bayt Baytak*, an Egyptian talk show between 2005-2007. These fatwas were collected in a book titled ***Contemporary Fatwas from the Grand Mufti of Egypt (al-Fatawa al-'Asriyyah li Muftī al-Diyār al-Misriyyah)***.

Another series of fatwas that were delivered by Dr. Ali were compiled under the title ***Good Words: Contemporary Fatwas (al-Kalim al-Tayyib: Fatawa 'Asriyah).*** This rich collection of fatwas tackled a wide spectrum of subjects pertaining to Muslims' daily life such as purification, prayer, almsgiving, pilgrimage, fasting, financial transactions, military, intellectual inquiry, family relations, endowments, inheritance, marriage and divorce, human rights, virtues and etiquette, as well as other issues closely related to contemporary life.

Because Dr. Ali is known for his keenness to connect the past heritage of the Muslim intellectual thoughts to our contemporary lives, he considers it important to penetrate deeply into the insights of the classical scholars to figure out their methodology of scientific thinking to answer people's questions. For this reason he issued a book titled ***The Fatwas of Imam Muhammad Abdu (Fatawa Al- Imam Muhammad Abdu).*** Dr. Ali chose Imam Muhammad Abdu, one of the pioneering figures of the revivalist scholars of jurisprudence, due to his renowned contribution to Islamic jurisprudence in modern times and the huge impact he has left on the intellectual Islamic heritage, in his effort to release the Muslim mind from the paralyzing deadlock state of stillness and hibernation which had long plagued Muslims.

In another book of fatwas titled ***Fatwas for the Muslim Household (Fatawa al-Bayt al-Muslim)***, which includes a collection of topics, Dr Ali was motivated by the fact that Jurists are always facing new unprecedented issues which require them to have a fresh understanding of the legal text to

adapt to people's endless issues and concerns in their personal lives.

Given the special importance that the month of Ramadan has in the hearts of Muslims, Dr. Ali dedicated a whole book of fatwas that are all pertinent to the month of Ramadan titled ***Fatwas for Ramadan (al-Fatawa al-Ramadaneyah).*** Dr. Ali dedicates this book to dealing with different juristic issues pertinent to this month such as fatwas on fasting, praying, alms giving or *zakah*, and '*umrah* or the smaller pilgrimage.

**JURISPRUDENCE**

Dr. Ali has written a wide range of books in the field of Islamic jurisprudence in which aimed at explaining the different juristic opinions of the various Islamic schools of law. An example is his book, ***Imam al-Shafi'ī and his School of Jurisprudence.*** Imam al-Shafi'ī, known as the founder of Islamic Jurisprudence, was the first to differentiate between the application of discretion in legal matters (*Istihsān*), and the juristic reasoning by analogy (*Qiyās*). Dr. Ali is known to have been greatly influenced by his thinking, especially in the latter's harmonization of the revealed sources with human reasoning, thus providing a foundation for both reason and revelation in legal theory.

Dr. Ali takes us further in a journey inside the four legal schools of jurisprudence in his book titled ***The Gateway to Studying the Schools of Jurisprudence.*** This 400-page book is an attempt to explain to the reader the methodology, impact and contributions of the four legal Sunni schools of Jurisprudence. The aim of this book is to understand the manner of reading Islamic jurisprudence as it was read and comprehended by the founders of these legal schools namely Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Malek, Imam al-Shafi'ī and Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal. Dr. Ali does not stop at that level but takes the reader into a journey inside each school discussing its main

contributors and their different opinions on different issues which shows us the latitude in their thinking to bear scientific arguments and the conceptual possibility of the existence of multiple variations in understanding the secondary issues through authentic readings of the Islamic texts. Of particular note is the emphasis placed by Dr. Ali on the Objectives of Islamic Law, namely preserving life, mind, religion, lineage and private property.

Having studied business and commerce before immersing himself in Islamic studies, Dr. Ali developed the full capacity and wisdom to translate Islamic Jurisprudence into modern day practices pertinent to the units of weight and measurement used as an equivalent to what is mentioned in the classical books of Islamic law. The book he wrote on this issue titled ***Weights and Measures in Sharīʻah Law.*** Bearing in mind the many varying opinions of the four Schools of Islamic Jurisprudence, Dr. Ali provides a clear and all-inclusive compilation for Muslims, particularly students of Islamic law, to use as a reference.

## REVIVING ISLAMIC TRADITION

Because of his deep passion for reviving the Islamic tradition, and his motivation to explain the art of mastering the know-how of reading the Islamic text, Dr. Ali delivered a series of lectures which were later combined in a book titled ***The Path to the Islamic Tradition: Epistemological Preliminaries and Methodological Approaches (al-Tarīq ila al-Turāth al-Islamī: Muqaddimah Ma'rifiyah wa Madākhil Manhajiyah)***. The aim of these lectures was to provide students and scholars in the Humanities and Social Sciences with some insights and explanations into basic concepts needed to approach Islamic tradition. In other words, this represented a crash course in how to deal with classical texts whether grammar and logic or analyses of the worldview adopted by the authors of those texts.

In his continual efforts to expose contemporary Muslims to their Islamic heritage, Dr. Ali delivered a series of lectures that were later compiled into a book titled ***The Implicit in Islamic Civilization (al-Kamen fī al-Hadārah al-Islamiyah)*** discussing the reasons contributing to the establishment of the Islamic civilization, and its contribution in arts, sciences and all the other fields of cultural output. In these lectures, Dr. Ali ventures deep, penetrating the surface level of the Islamic civilization to explore the persona of Muslims who built such a massive civilization, though they all came from different walks of life. Dr. Ali takes the reader into a journey of the sciences and arts that were developed and cultivated within the boundaries of the Islamic civilization. Throughout the book there is a great emphasis on the characteristics of the Muslims who built this civilization. Dr. Ali concludes his book by affirming that all the great Muslim contributions stem from a self that lives in harmony with the universe and a heart that is filled with mercy towards all living things and that is the driving force behind the Islamic civilization.

One of the latest publications of Dr. Ali in the field of reviving the Islamic heritage and tradition is a book titled ***The Higher Principles (al-Mabād' al-'Ozm).*** This book discusses the fundamental principles that guided the Muslim scholars in their rich writings in different Islamic sciences. The book is timely because of the recent calls to ignore the intellectual heritage and consider it irrelevant to our day's modern issues and concerns. According to Dr. Ali, the truth of the matter is that what we need from this heritage is the guiding methodology based on which these scholars produced their substantial contributions to Islamic sciences. This will allow us to articulate our own production that fits our time and place, while still remaining authentic to the methodology of the tradition.

## IJTIHAD

Dr. Ali has long adhered to the opinion of promoting *Ijtihād*, which primarily encourages independent and creative thinking among Muslims instead of denying them the right to have their own input in understanding and explaining Islam. He talks extensively about this pressing issue in a book titled The ***Tools of Ijtihād (Aliyāt al-Ijtihād)***. *Ijtihād* is an approach to the revival of Islamic sciences, particularly principles of Islamic Jurisprudence, something which is especially needed to adapt to the fast paced development of the modern age. Dr. Ali is a strong advocate of reform and renewal of Islamic sciences, without compromising the commandments of the faith. This is why he is known to be one of the most prominent proponents of *ijtihād*. But he has also set very strict rules and regulations defining a Mujtahid and governing the responsible practice of *Ijtihād* so as to protect the heritage of Islamic thought and safeguard the original message of Islam as first revealed by God.

## THE EGYPTIAN EXPERIENCE

The Egyptian model of building a modern nation is an example that is worthy of close examination from all aspects, whether political, economic, cultural, legal, religious and scientific. Dr. Ali wrote a book on this issue titled ***The Egyptian Experience (al-Tajrebah al-Misriyah)***. These issues started to take root and grow in the time of the ruler Muhammad Ali Pasha, and have continued to do so up to the present. The unique Egyptian experience of building a modern nation did not start in a vacuum but actually had its roots in Egyptian history, especially its role as a land of Divine Messages. Dr. Ali delved into the history of the making of the modern constitutional Egypt and how Egyptians dealt with the Western wave of renaissance.

## HAJJ & RAMADAN

Pilgrimage or *hajj* for Muslims is considered one of the main pillars in Islam: a journey which Muslims are required to do once in a life time for those who have the financial and physical ability to perform it. In his book titled ***Hajj and 'Umra: Secrets and Rulings. (al-Hajj wa al-'Umra: Asrār wa Ahkām)***, Dr. Ali takes us on a journey to delve into the rituals of pilgrimage and the secrets behind them. He narrates the story of Prophet Abraham in which God asked Abraham to call on people for pilgrimage, but Abraham thought that his voice would not reach very far. However God fulfilled his promise to Abraham by saying that people will come from all over the world and different walks of life to join the pilgrimage. Nowadays the number of pilgrims reaches two to three million each year in a spiritual journey where people abandon their daily lives with its fast pace to indulge into a divine life where the heart enjoys receiving the divine light from heaven.

As for Ramadan, it enjoys a special position within the Muslim communities all over the world. The importance of this month stems from reverence as the month in which the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Dr. Ali delivered a series of lectures in reference to Ramadan which were combined in a book titled ***The Gatherings of the Righteous in Ramadan (Magāles al-Sālehīn fī Ramadan)***. He talked extensively about the spirituality that reaches its height in Ramadan where we find people in a constant state of fasting, praying, giving alms, helping the poor, participating in charitable activities, remembering God, supplicating and performing night prayers. Ramadan is a time of renewal of one's covenant with God, sometimes after a lengthy period of heedlessness. Therefore, Dr. Ali explains in this work the moral effect that Ramadan has on Muslims and how to achieve maximum benefit in the blessed month.

## GLOBAL ISSUES

Through his different writings, Dr. Ali has tackled a wide array of issues which are pertinent to our contemporary world. For example he wrote a book on the environment titled ***Environmentalism: An Islamic Perspective.*** Dr. Ali explains that the well being of the environment is very much connected with mankind's spiritual well being. The obvious signs of the degradation of the environment are nothing but a direct consequence of our failure to properly cultivate our spiritual, intellectual and physical sides. The Islamic perspective towards the environment revolves around having the right to enjoy the blessings and resources of the environment without denying the right of the future generations to have the same rights to utilize the environment. The job of man on earth is not merely to preserve the environment but more importantly he has been asked to uncover the secrets of the universe through actively developing it.

Dr. Ali dedicated two volumes to discussing some pressing contemporary issues which had caused controversy among Muslims. He titled this book as ***Illumination for that which Perplexes the Minds (al-Bayān lema Yashghal al-Azhān).*** In this work, Dr. Ali discusses a wide range of topics starting with issues related to the Islamic creed and the position of the Islamic Message in relation to other Divine Messages. He tackles the critical issue of the position of women in Islam, refuting accusations of women being disadvantaged regarding inheritance and polygamy, and addressing the role of women in public life.

The issue of *Sharī'ah* (Islamic law) application takes on great importance in Dr. Ali's writings, as a misunderstanding of the concept of Islamic law and the art of applying it has deviated people from the true spirit of Islam. One of the main issues of which Islam is falsely accused with is the issue of killing the one who changes his / her religion and Dr. Ali explains clearly

that killing such a person an is not mandated in Islam as it goes directly against the major Islamic principle of there being no compulsion in religion. He goes on to distinguish between freedom of religion and safeguarding public order. Similar false accusations addressed by Sheikh Ali are those related to terrorism and the infamous myth of Islam having been spread by the sword.

The issue of Sufism takes a whole chapter on its own given its importance as being the spirit of Islam, and Dr. Ali ends the book with a final chapter on issues related to traditions and customs like the issue of women wearing the *niqab* (full face veil) and the issue of growing the beard for men, among other cultural and community related issues.

Along similar lines of discussing contemporary issues and terminologies, Dr. Ali wrote a book titled ***Salient Features of Modern Times: The Perspective of Someone Concerned (Simāt al-'Asr: Ruyat Muhtamm).*** This book is a collection of columns written by Sheikh Ali Gomaa and published in al-Ahram newspaper and other publications, together with some other materials never published before.

The articles tackle an array of important subjects such as the concept of community in Islam, sacred language, the relative and the absolute, the differences between Sunnis and Shi'tes, and the Danish cartoon crisis.

## JIHAD

One of the issues which caused a huge uproar among non Muslims especially after 9-11 is the issue of Jihad. "Jihad" is perhaps the most misinterpreted and controversial of all Islamic terms. In order to clarify the matter, Dr. Ali decided to publish a book titled ***Jihad in Islam (al-Jihād fī al-Islām)***. This also facilitated his efforts at building bridges of understanding between Muslims and the West, and to realize

his hope of fostering better ties and channels of cooperation. Divided into two sections, “Jihad in Islam” is a concise monograph offering a comprehensive overview of the term, and delving into the deep, profound significance of the concept, as supported by facts and incidents from military ventures during the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

In his second book on Jihad, Dr. Ali gave people the opportunity to pose their many questions and concerns regarding the issue of Jihad, answering them all in a book titled ***Misconceptions and Refutations about Jihad in Islam (Shubuhāt wa Ijābāt hawl al-Jihād fī al-Islām).*** Structuring his treatment of the issue of Jihad in Islam and its legality, Dr. Ali starts with an introduction citing a Quranic verse stating that Prophet Muhammad was only sent as a mercy to all the worlds. Dr. Ali explains this verse further by saying that the true mission of the Prophet is to be a mercy to everyone, Muslims and non-Muslims, Arabs and non-Arabs. His mercy is neither limited to a specific time nor confined to a certain place. It is a general all encompassing state that is present in times of peace and war alike. With this introduction, Dr. Ali discusses the issue of Jihad stating that it is considered to be a valid legal war in the eyes of logical thinkers. Its validity stems from its ethical goal, method, terms and stipulations, cessation or ending, and the consequences of these wars.

## BUKHARI HADITH COLLECTION

As a commemoration of the work of the Imam al-Bukhari who is considered by the majority of Muslim scholars to have the most accurate hadith collection, Dr. Ali wrote a book titled ***Imam al-Bukhari and his Collection of Authentic Hadiths (al-Imam al-Bukharī wa Jami‘uhu al-Sahīh)***. This book contains both a biography and a survey of the intellectual and scholarly output of the Muslim scholar Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari, known for the famous canonical collection of

authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), *Sahih Bukhari*.

## WOMEN'S ISSUES

Understanding the importance of the role of women in society and their pioneering role in building the Islamic civilization, Dr. Ali wrote a book titled ***Women in Islamic Civilization between Religious Texts, Legal Tradition, and the World in which We Live (al-Mar'a fī al-Hadārah al-Islāmiyah Bayn Nusūs al-Shar' wa Turāth al-Fiqh wa al-Wāqi')***. The book is well researched, artfully written, and meticulously organized, providing the most basic and most frequently discussed issues pertaining to gender equality and the status of women in Islam, including polygyny, spousal abuse, female leadership, the testimony of women in court, and many others. Divided into three main parts reflecting the status of women in religious texts, legal traditions and in modern world, the book is without a doubt an indispensable reference for whoever attempts to research this important and sensitive subject, given that misinterpretations of the issue are at the heart of so many misconceptions about Islam.

Complaints against the supposed inequality between men and women in Islam also led Dr. Ali to write a book titled ***Women between the Equity of Islam and the Misconceptions of the Other (al-Mar'ah bayn Insāf al-Islām wa Shobuhāt al Akhar).***Though a lot of scholars delved into this issue and wrote widely about women's rights, Dr. Ali took another dimension which separates his work from others. Instead of taking a defensive stance by stating the rights of women in Islam and how Islam was keen to restore the long lost dignity of women before the precedence of Islam, he broadened his vision to include a holistic perspective where he looks at the issue of women from the angle of rights and duties, as women are the equals of men as the Prophet stated.

In another instance, Dr. Ali took a juristic approach, writing a book about women's issues in Islamic jurisprudence titled ***Women's issues in Islamic Jurisprudence (Qadayah al-Mar'ah fī al- Fiqh al- Islamī)***. Dr. Ali starts his book with an introductory chapter emphasizing the unity of the origin of both men and women and the shared equity that they both enjoy in terms of duties and responsibilities. The only measure of preference between them is based on piety. This was abundantly clear in Quran as it abhorred the old pre Islamic practice of burying female infants alive and the Prophet indicated that women are the equals of men. The apparent difference between them is only in terms of specialization not discrimination of one gender over the other.

Dr. Ali delves into issues pertinent to women in Islamic jurisprudence to defy the accusations of injustice that are practiced against women. The first chapter is dedicated to the inheritance of women and their allotted shares. The second chapter discusses the issue of the testimony of women and the accusations that are raised around it. Then Dr. Ali talks about the issue of polygamy and its reality. The next chapter refers to the right of woman to choose her marital spouse. The rest of the chapters discuss a host of other issues such as woman leadership in prayer and her political rights.

In a continuation of this theme, Dr. Ali dedicated two voluminous books to giving fatwas on women issues. The first of them is titled ***Fatwas on Women's Issues (Fatawa al-Nisa').*** Though the title of the book would indicate that it is relevant only to women's issues, in the introduction Dr. Ali indicates that this book is pertinent to both men and women. The first chapter speaks about issues that are pertinent to the six elements of the Islamic creed. The second chapter is relevant to women's issues regarding purification and ablution for prayers or any other form of worship. Then he extensively talks about all issues and concerns of women that might be encountered during prayers, pilgrimage, and fasting. Also Dr.

Ali dedicates a whole chapter on issues of marriage, betrothal and divorce. Dr. Ali delves into issues relevant to pregnancy, breast feeding and newly born babies. Issues pertinent to the realm of the employment of women and promoting her to leadership positions in politics such as being a court judge or general prosecutor among other jobs are discussed extensively in the subsequent chapter. The book ends with a chapter on general issues that are pertinent to our daily lives.

The second book discussing women's issues titled ***Fatwas on Woman's issues in Islamic Jurisprudence (Fatawa al-Mar'ah al-Muslimah).*** Dr. Ali dedicates more than 300 pages book to discuss issues of women in Islamic jurisprudence. He categorizes these issues into different sections staring with topics that are relevant to rituals like praying, fasting, alms giving, and pilgrimage. He then moves on to family issues that are pertinent to engagement, marriage, divorce, alimony, custody, abuse and abortion. The second chapter of the book discusses the Islamic perspective on women through the Quran and the Prophetic traditions to emphasize the level of reverence enjoyed by women in Islam. The last chapter in its entirety talks about role models for women, by citing examples of women in Islamic history who held leadership posts, including becoming religious scholars, sultans, judges, and leaders in war.

# Chapter 10: Civic and Public Engagement

One of the least well-known dimensions of Sheik Ali Gomaa's work is perhaps his multifaceted engagement in issues related to civil society. This engagement has naturally impacted on Sheik Ali's work as a Mufti; often times, however, it has far exceeded the strict purview of his official functions at Dār al-Iftā'. Sheik Ali Gomaa has indeed spared no effort in bringing about change and helping the nation of Egypt and its citizens to fulfill their full societal and civilizational potential. Sheik Ali Gomaa is in this regard a somewhat unusual Islamic scholar. One might even argue that Sheik Ali has shifted the paradigm, offering a new model of philanthropy which combines scholarship in Islamic studies with a visionary outlook for community development and civic engagement. This has made him into not just an Islamic jurist, but indeed a public intellectual of the highest order.

The model Dr. Ali offers stems from his unwavering belief in the importance of combining faith with good deeds as faith alone does not entitle one to be a true believer. Reflecting on the prophetic tradition which indicates that "the best among you are those who are most beneficial to others" formed a motivational drive and sketched his path in the field of community development through civil societal activities.

Sheik Ali Gomaa developed a passion for charity work from his youth years. He established the first small charity organization serving the community when he was only 17 years old. In all his charitable works Sheik Ali has sought to apply the proverb, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for one day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a life time". Dr. Ali's original philosophy revolves around the development of the human being himself as this is the first and most essential building block in the development of any society.

Human development in terms of constructing his intellectual capacity and developing his mind set which would provide him with the fuel needed for steering the wheel of his life towards prosperity is one of the main reasons for his engagement in civil work. With every rule having its own exceptions, we find certain categories of needy people who are unable to pursue self development for different reasons like being advanced in age, young or handicapped which hinder their capacity to work and contribute to the society. For these certain categories providing the “fish” is mandatory, as Dr. Ali explained.

Sheik Ali Gomaa recognizes the importance of civil society in catering for the needs of marginalized citizens, especially those who live in areas that have effectively been abandoned by the state’s developmental projects. He has called upon all parties to fulfill their duties of helping the poor and developing Egyptian society.[103]

Sheik Ali Gomaa has used the access to the media granted by his position to call for a greater involvement of his fellow citizens in various charitable and developmental projects. In an article published in the Egyptian daily Al-Ahram, the Grand Mufti expressed the importance of participating in the Egyptian Food Bank project. The Egyptian Food Bank is a non-profit and non-partisan organization striving to eradicate hunger in the country. It focuses on the most vulnerable groups in society – old people, disabled, the chronically ill, widows, orphans, and single women with children. The Food Bank provides nutrition to some 120,000 families across the country. It has also initiated a number of innovative projects, including the provision of *iftar* meals during Ramadan; the establishment of the Sacrifice Bonds, which helps to distribute the meat from the animals sacrificed during the Holiday of Eid

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103 See for example Bayan Dar al Ifta, 15/3/2011.

al-Adha to more than a million families.[104] Dr. Ali Gomaa argued that the fight against hunger is an obligation for Muslims, reminding his readers that God in the Holy Qur'an describes the pious person as the one who gives food to the poor, the orphan and the captive (Holy Qur'an, Al-Insan: 8). Sheik Ali Gomaa maintains that the Islamic jurists provided nuanced definitions of hunger that are more precise and comprehensive than the ones currently discussed in the social scientific literature.[105]

Education, Knowledge and Science: promoting these three inter-related dimensions of human civilizational achievement lies at the center of Sheik Ali Gomaa's civic advocacy. Sheik Ali has followed in this regard the example set by Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh, considered by many the greatest Islamic reformer of the 20th century. Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh established a charity organization which served the society by building schools and hospitals, as well as promoting greater social cohesion and solidarity. As Mufti of Egypt, Sheik Ali Gomaa has in turn used his authority to call for a greater investment in the educational and scientific fields on the part of Egyptians. A recent fatwa issued by Dār al-Iftā' highlighted this commitment. Ahmad Zuwayl, a famous Egyptian scientist and winner of the Nobel prize, is the founder and chairman of the board of trustees of the Zuwayl City for Science and Technology. In the context of a scientific developmental project entitled "Egyptian Renaissance", Zuwayl asked the Grand Mufti whether his non-profitable organization was entitled to receive money from the obligatory alms (*zakat*), charity donations and religious endowments. In his response dated 25/10/2011, Sheik Ali Gomaa started by recalling how Islam honors knowledge and those who pursue it. The Grand Mufti stressed that the knowledge that is praised in the Qur'an

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104 See http://egyptianfoodbank.com/ for details.
105 Ali Gomaa, "Bank al–Ta‘am", Al–Ahram.

is not exclusively religious in nature, but also includes material and mundane types of knowledge. He argued that *zakat* – the obligatory alms paid by adult Muslims – seeks to achieve the common good of the society. Humans take precedence over infrastructures. Deploying a characteristic mode of reasoning, Sheik Ali Gomaa noted that striving in the path of Allah (*al-jihād fī sabīl Allah*) is one of the reasons for *zakat*, and that jihad – as is well-known – includes the "jihad of the tongue" (*jihād al-lisān*). Recalling a Prophetic hadith that states that whoever travels in search of knowledge is in the path of Allah until he returns, Sheik Ali Gomaa argued that scientific research is amongst the highest levels of jihad in today's world. The deterrent power that results from being a scientifically developed nation ultimately serves to prevent aggression and to achieve world peace. Realizing the importance of knowledge for civilization-building, Dār al-Iftā' under Sheik Ali's authority therefore ruled that giving charity money to Zuwayl's scientific project was not only allowed, but strongly supported. The fatwa is innovative in so far as it contributes to shift the traditional recipients of charity away from religious institutions to the wider social and scientific fields.[106]

The importance of *zakat* (alms) and *sadaqa* (charity) in solving social and economic problems has often been under-emphasized in the contemporary Islamic world. In his fatwas and pronouncements Sheik Ali Gomaa has tried to correct this lack of awareness by showing how *zakat* can fulfill a range of societal functions broader than feeding the poor. Sheik Ali Gomaa has argued that *zakat* can be used to facilitate the marriage of poor youngsters who would otherwise be unable to finance the acquisition of a home for the couple. Such an act lies amongst the preferred recipient of *zakat*, on condition that the youngsters have a skill and an income that is sufficient to

106 Fatwa 513/2011 issued 25/10/2011.

provide for the family.[107] In another fatwa, the Grand Mufti has allowed the use of *zakat* money for a hospital specialized in children's cancer.[108] The use of *zakat* should not be bound by territorial boundaries when the relevant conditions are present. Given the tragic drought afflicting Somalia, the Mufti of Egypt called in August 2011 on Muslims to direct their *zakat* money to that country in order to help eradicate the hunger and disease that prevails in Somalia.[109]

**Misr Elkheir**

Sheik Ali Gomaa's work in the field of philanthropy and charity reaches millions of people across Egypt. The most famous organization in which he is involved in this field – Misr Elkheir – was founded in 2007. Misr Elkheir is a non-profit foundation that strives to eradicate poverty throughout Egypt by way of intelligent investments for its donations and a rapid method of dispersal.

Sheik Ali Gomaa currently acts as the chairman of the board of trustees. Misr Elkheir is a pioneering institution that seeks to revive the function of the traditional religious endowment (*waqf*) in the contemporary world. It constitutes one of the largest non profit organizations focusing on civic engagement and societal development in Egypt. The organization is open to all sectors of society. This organization was founded by Shayhk Ali in order to develop the human potentialities for the purpose of creating a better future ahead. The Grand Mufti has relied on his knowledge and interpersonal skills – including his own training in business – to attract a wide variety of donations from Egyptian middle and upper classes. The

107 Ali Gomaa, Al–Kalim al–Tayyib: Fatawa 'Asriyya, vol 1., p. 61.
108 Ali Gomaa, Al–Kalim al–Tayyib: Fatawa 'Asriyya, vol 1., p. 69.
109 "Egypt's Mufti calls to direct zakat money to Somalia", http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/485648.

organization is engaged in a wide range of activities, detailed below:

In the field of education, the organization has been the driving force behind the construction and maintenance of some 200 community elementary schools in the governorates of Sohag and Asyut in Upper Egypt. These schools currently accommodate around 5,427 students. The organization also constructed three preparatory schools to receive students graduating from elementary schools.

Furthermore, the organization helped in giving full support to a number of educational establishments, as follows:

- Training and qualifying specialists to communicate with students who have special needs.
- Educational integration and merging of students who have special needs in regular schools, and re-qualifying them to fit in and benefit the most from their education. This initiative was applied in 15 schools in the governorates of Al Fayoum and Bani Suwayf costing 686,100 L.E.
- Initiating a project to support an educational center for students who suffer from visual impairment by providing the center with all the requisite educational tools and equipment necessary to serve around 180 students in the governorates of Suhag, Asyut and Quena, with an eventual goal of increasing the number of students benefitting from this project to 1000 within five years.
- Universities took part in development as well. The organization initiated a project titled *Ishraq* or "illumination" at the University of Fayoum which consisted of the following:
- Providing 75% of textbooks to 731 students.

- Covering the tuition fees of 594 students.
- Covering the accommodation fees in dormitory for 279 students.
- Executing two clothing fairs (winter and summer) for 800 students.
- A care project for university students in which tuition fees were covered for 921 students in Cairo and ‘Ayn Shams Universities.
- A project for improving the graduates of technical education in the governorate of Al Minya in which 10,000 students were trained in the field of commercial, hospitality and nursing. An important part of this project was to also connect these students with the job market and business contacts in their areas.
- Providing educational opportunities to eliminate the illiteracy of 51, 750 Egyptians.

Misr El-Kheir has also worked tirelessly in the field of health, achieving a number of important landmarks that have benefitted the Egyptian people, especially the sick and needy among them. These include the following:

- The organization contributed to conducting surgeries to repair the eyesight of more than 3,517 blind people.
- Offering medical consultation to 23,029 patients suffering from sight problems and providing the necessary medical treatment for them.
- Providing medical equipment to treat patients at a cost of 18, 784, 240 L.E in three years.
- Delivering the most advanced operation room for Coronary catheterization in the Middle East, at the Center of Dr. Magdy Ya’qoub, for treating patients

with heart problems in the governorate of Aswan, costing 8, 565, 805 L.E.

- Contributing in coordination with a number of partners to prepare a medical unit for pre-term infants in the hospitals of the university of ‘Ayn Shams costing 4, 513, 987 L.E.
- Preparing the medical center in Duwiqa, an impoverished area in Cairo, by providing all medical equipment required to help the people living in this area, costing 1, 190,000 L.E.
- Establishing a medical center in the governorate of Suhag for treating facial and head deformities, costing 1,000,000 L.E. This center performs 80 surgeries monthly.
- Preparing a dialysis treatment unit at the hospital of Hay’at al Naql al ‘Am, costing 74,000 L.E.
- Buying advanced anesthesia and drug analysis equipment for the psychiatric and anti addiction unit in the hospital of Qasr al-‘Ayny, costing 620,000 L.E.
- A project for buying a surgical video scope for the treatment of Esophageal cases in the hospital of Aswan Al Ta’leemy costing 35,000 L.E.
- A project for developing, replacing and renovating imaging and diagnoses equipment for breast diseases in the department of radiology at the hospital of Al Dimirdash in ‘Ayn Shams University, costing 330,000 L.E.
- A project for purchasing medical equipment for the Rheumatology Unit in the hospital of Qasr al ‘Ayny, costing 270,000 L.E.

- Donating a floor, along with the necessary equipment, for visual rehabilitation in the hospital of ‘Uyoon Masr costing 250,000 L.E.
- A project to purchase two sonar devices for the emergency and critical pregnancy units at the hospital of Al Qasr Al ‘Ayny, costing 219,000 L.E.
- The purchase of a Vaco device for the operations on eye cataracts in the hospital of Hermel costing 185,000 L.E.
- An initiative to purchase medical equipment for prisons, costing 180,484 L.E.
- Delivering an ambulance to the institute of Oncology, costing 160,000 L.E.
- A project for developing the therapeutic endoscope for the hospital of Piliana costing 150,000 L.E.
- A project to purchase and develop software devices for the CR equipment in the Radiology unit in the hospital of Dimerdash in ‘Ayn Shams University costing 60,000 L.E.
- Concluding an agreement to establish five sewage channels in five villages in the governorate of Fayoum costing 5,000,000 L.E.
- Delivering pure tab water to 3,623 houses in Upper Egypt.

Misr El-Kheir has also undertaken a number of projects designed to enhance social cohesion and solidarity by investing in those willing to work to earn a living for their families, but unable to afford start-up expenses. These projects include:

- The Photocopier Project: Te organization delivers a photocopier machine to the beneficiary after training

him on how to use it. An agreement is concluded with companies specializing in delivering photocopying machines to provide beneficiaries with suitable prices and to guarantee regular maintenance of the machine so as to provide full support for the user. Along these lines there is ongoing supervision to assure the success of the project in providing a continual source of income for the beneficiary.

- The Sewing Machine Project: n this project a sewing machine is delivered, along with clothing material required for the start up of the project. There is also ongoing supervision and support to guarantee the continual success of the project.

- The Field Carriage Project: carriage, as well as an animal to pull it, is provided to the beneficiary so that he may earn an income transporting different goods in his locality. Continual supervision is conducted to guarantee the continual success of the project.

- The "Tricycle" Project: tricycle is delivered to the user, consisting of a motorbike with a solid metal box to deliver goods. Continual supervision is conducted to guarantee the continual success of the project.

- The Kiosk Project: n this project, the organization provides to the beneficiary high-quality kiosks for selling goods. The delivered kiosk is provided with electricity, a license to operate, and goods equaling 5,000 L.E to start the project. The method of conducting the business is agreed upon between the organization and the beneficiary, in terms of abiding by certain working hours and not selling unhealthy goods such as cigarettes. If the beneficiary does not abide by the signed agreement with its conditions, and does not demonstrate a serious dedication to the business, the project is immediately transferred to another user. In cases in which the beneficiary abides

by all the conditions and stipulations, he is entitled to 100% of the earnings from the kiosk.

Another important function of the charitable institution is the provision of essential needs for destitute families:

- The project to pay the debts of destitute debtors: The organization was able to pay the debts of 7400 debtors who were unable to pay them because of extreme poverty. Under the terms of this project, economic and social data are collected on potential beneficiaries to understand their situation and the amount of debt that they were imprisoned for. The organization conducts settlement sessions with the creditor to pay back the debts for the imprisoned debtors and bail them out of jails.
  Thereafter, beneficiaries' cases are followed so as to know their status after being released from prison, and to attempt to provide them with suitable employment or business opportunities to guarantee a monthly earning that would prevent them from falling into debt once again. As well, agreements are conducted with specialists to aid with beneficiaries' psychological rehabilitation after their release from prison.

- The project for repairing houses: the organization handles the necessary repairs for houses of families who are financially unable to bear this expense. Houses are upgraded from clay to bricks, and the organization provides the families with electricity, pure tab water, and maintenance expenses.

- The project for reconstructing houses: the organization rebuilds demolished houses, providing for them all necessary repairs along with pure tab water and electricity. As an example of this project, Misr el-Kheir rebuilt houses demolished by floods in the governorate of Aswan.

- The project of seasonal feeding: the project provides the essential necessities of food during the month of Ramadan to destitute families after conducting some research field work to determine the cases that are most in need of help.
- The project for feeding needy elderly citizens: the organization delivers monthly food shares for elderly citizens who are unable to provide for themselves and do not have any family supporting them.
- The project of assisting elderly citizens: in this project elderly Egyptians who do not have any family support are given a monthly stipend large enough to keep them from having to beg from others.

In keeping with his insistence on the importance of research in all the fields of human knowledge, the Grand Mufti has placed a great emphasis on the importance of scientific research for the development of the capacities of the Egyptian nation. Accomplishments in this area include the following:

- A set of scientific medical researches have been conducted to investigate treatments for different diseases, especially diabetes and cancer.
- The funding of other scientific research work, as for example, the provision of scholarships for master's-level degrees in cooperation with the Scientific Academy of Research.
- The granting of scholarships to students travelling to Italy to study techniques of technical education.
- Contributions towards a number of initiatives aimed at highlighting, supporting and further developing the scientific position of Egypt. This was done through supporting the following events:

    1. Egyptian Sciences and Engineering Fair.

2. Developing scientific journals and magazines.
3. Awards for scientific publications.
4. Funding scientific conferences such as the fifth International conference of medical engineering in Cairo, the meetings of the Business and Society Cluster in the UK in cooperation with the German University.
5. Scientific cooperation with the University of Alexandria.

Misr El-Kheir has also taken a special interest in enriching the quality of livestock in Egypt. It established the biggest farm in the Middle East over 200 acres of land and succeeded in genetically improving the breed of Egyptian buffalos through artificial insemination: 10,000 buffalos were inseminated to improve the Egyptian breed in order to reach the highest quantities of produced milk. Egyptian buffalos generally produce 4 to 5 kilos of milk daily whereas the first generation of those who have been bred under this program are able to produce 10-12 kilos. The second generation of the improved buffalos generates 12-18 kilos of milk daily.

**The Environment**

In addition to his association with Misr EL-Kheir, Sheik Ali Gomaa has been involved in a range of different projects. Ecology has been one of these. The Grand Mufti was perhaps amongst the first Muslim scholars to actively and vocally campaign for the protection of the environment – arguably one of the defining questions of our generation (and the following). For the Grand Mufti, the importance of caring for the environment emerges naturally from the Islamic concept of *khilafa* (vicegerency). Since humans are God's deputies on the earth, they bear responsibility both for protecting the planet and for developing it. While the latter dimension has often been noticed, the former seems to have received short-shrift in

the Muslim literature. Sheik Ali Gomaa has set out to correct this. In addition to various speeches, Sheik Ali Gomaa has authored a full book on the topic – one of the first dealing with the topic written from within the Islamic tradition. Sheik Ali Gomaa’s timely engagement with environmental issues is felicitous: the discipline he cherishes, Islamic Law, has comprehensively addressed the issue of environmental conservation. According to the Grand Mufti, the Islamic legal heritage is replete with fatwas that tie the development of the world to the general framework of religion. Sheik Ali Gomaa has started to recover these rulings from the old history books in order to bring about a greater sensitivity, if not a radical change, in the consciousness of his fellow coreligionists towards ecological matters. Muslims are particularly well equipped to deal with these issues given their beliefs: as the Grand Mufti has pointed out, Muslims approach all animated creatures with an attitude of equality and partnership in worshipping the same God. They do not differentiate between smaller creatures or more impressive ones because what matter to them is their common origin. They are particularly wary of the fate that befalls those who “spread corruption on the earth” (Qur’an 2: 27).

Under Sheik Ali Gomaa’s leadership Dār al-Iftā’ has engaged in the pressing global debate about the environment and environmentally-related problems and solutions. The Grand Mufti and his representatives have participated in several international conferences and forums that have tried to tackle the problem. One prominent event in which Sheik Ali recently participated was organized by the Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Jordan. 100 Muslim scholars met to share and exchange ideas on the role of the Holy Qur’an, the Prophetic Hadith and the values of the Islamic religion in providing solutions to the environmental crises that confront the human species. In his speech, Sheik Ali Gomaa focused on the necessity of educational reform. The Grand Mufti stressed the imperative of including discussions of environment

pollution, climate change and global warming in the curricula of schools across the Muslim world. These ecological dangers represent a greater threat to humanity than wars.

In a recent interview to a prominent Egyptian daily (Al-Masry al-Youm), Sheik Ali Gomaa has called upon religious scholars and preachers to help save the environment by participating in environmental conferences and by educating common Muslims about the related problems in the Friday sermon and other lectures.[110]

Sheik Ali Gomaa is also leading by example: Dār al-Iftā’ has taken measures to reduce carbon emissions and is hoping to become a fully carbon-neutral institution very soon.

## The Family

Many of the initiatives undertaken by Sheik Ali Gomaa in the field of civic engagement have targeted the central institution of social life, namely the family. Sheik Ali Gomaa’s work as a mufti has brought him into direct contact with some of the malfunctioning dimensions of family life in Egypt. In his work as a mufti as well as in his capacity as a civic actor, Sheik Ali Gomaa has sought to redress this situation. Sheik Ali’s activities in the civil sphere have allowed the Grand Mufti the possibility of acting pre-emptively in order to ensure that Egyptian families in real life approach the noble ideals that he believes are enshrined in the Islamic religion. Sheik Ali Gomaa has paid particular attention to questions of marriage and divorce, carefully measuring and weighing the different types of contracts and their respective evidences.

Sheik Ali Gomaa has also paid particular attention to the questions of women. His fatwa forbidding female genital

110 Hoda Baraka, “Green Profile: Interview with Ali Gomaa”, Al Masry al Youm, 31/03/2011.

mutilation was a crucial intervention in a particularly sensitive subject. In a groundbreaking fatwa, Sheik Ali has argued that women have equal political rights in Islam, including the right to become a head of state and lead a modern nation. Drawing on the rich heritage of Islamic tradition, Sheik Ali Gomaa has opined that women have the full right to become presidents of modern states.

Sheik Ali Gomaa's civic engagement has been translated into a number of fatwas. An illustration of this engagement was provided by a recent fatwa issued by the Grand Mufti's Office concerning the participation of Egyptian citizens in the legislative elections of 2011/2012. In the period marked by deep political uncertainty that characterizes post-revolutionary Egypt, Sheik Ali Gomaa urged his coreligionists to vote, stating that participation in the elections constituted an act of work towards the common good and in fact a serious political obligation, and in fact the suppression of one's "witnessing" (*shahāda*) at this momentous historical juncture was Islamically illegitimate.[111]

### Sectarian Strife

Sheik Ali Gomaa has used his authority to combat any sectarianism that arises in Egyptian society. In his fatwas and interventions, Sheik Ali Gomaa has stressed the full equality between Muslims and Christians, categorically refusing the idea of first, second or third class citizens, and insisting as strongly as possible on the corruption caused by ideologies which seek to hijack any religion to sow corruption and violence in Egypt and around the world.[112] He has affirmed the right of Christians to build churches in Egypt, arguing in a

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111 Al-asry Al-oum, November 27, 2011, http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/520806

112 See the chapter on Dialogue for further details on this.

fatwa that it is absolutely permissible to build institutions required for their rites and ceremonies, whose presence and continuity is encouraged by Islam. “There is, therefore, no objection to [building churches] in the texts. And this has been the practice of Muslims for centuries, and is in accordance with the laws of the Egyptian state.”[113]

Indeed, Dr Ali has repeatedly voiced his support for the Coptic community as an integral part of the Egyptian nation. In this regard, and in view of the increased sectarian sentiment in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution, he has initiated a project, The *Wifaq* Initiative, to unify Christians and Muslims during this crucial juncture. This initiative is based on the basic principle of a shared allegiance and patriotism towards the Egyptian nation. The cooperation between Muslims and Christians is an entrenched partnership with deep roots in the worldview of the Egyptian people, and is undisputed amongst the various political powers, national institutions, and revolutionary figures. Through this initiative, the Mufti has called on an end to intimidation and hostilities amongst the different segments of the Egyptian nation. Instead of dredging up of superficial issues which are of no benefit and only inflame emotions, the Mufti insists that the focus be on the essentials on which all Egyptians agree, and which can further the goals of the revolutions. For the love of Egypt, proclaimed by all Egyptians, means to take part in public life to work towards the common good of Egypt instead of individual and sectarian agendas.

The Mufti noticed a comparable need within the Muslim community after the revolution. Therefore, he founded a similar initiative to urge different segments of the Muslim community, and particularly Islamist political parties, to agree on common principles to structure their engagement, and to

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113 Fatwa on building churches, issued September 21, 2011

lower the temperature on some of the heated rhetoric that was being witnessed in the media. He called on “a new era of cooperation and communication between the various Muslim groups, based on a commitment to the unity of the umma, and an agreement to dispel disagreement and discord among its members.” This requires, first of all, according to the Mufti, “a recognition of the common ground between different Islamist groups… This common ground is without doubt large and vast … and forms the essence of the Islamic identity. This area of commonality represents both the authority of Islam and the importance of mutual agreement and cooperation.” Secondly, there must also be an appreciation for the variety of roles played by different segments of the Muslim community, such as scientists, educators, preachers, as well as activists for political, social and economic reform. Each of these represents an important task which needs to be fulfilled. Finally, the Mufti has called on an attitude of dialogue and tolerance, for it is only through these that Egyptians and Muslims will be able to transcend that which divides them.

Sheik Ali Gomaa has also used his position as Grand Mufti – and his access to foreign dignitaries – to call for international cooperation in the field of development and civil society. In a recent meeting with the Danish Ambassador in Cairo, for example, Sheik Ali Gomaa has called on European states to fulfill their promises and help Egypt through economic support, developmental projects and scientific exchanges.[114]

Dr. Ali Gomaa has been revolutionary in transforming the role of the Grand Mufti from someone who is simply called upon to offer religious opinions into an institution which seeks to guide the religious conscience and sensibilities of the Egyptian nation. Indeed, he has become a public intellectual and thinker whose work has transcended Egyptian boundaries and has

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114 Bayan Dar al–Ifta, 12/9/2011.

moved other Islamic personalities to not only engage with him, but learn from his methods and strategies.

## Chapter 11: Conclusion

This book has provided a broad overview of what constitutes arguably the most important facets of a highly prominent contemporary Muslim scholar, the Grand Mufti of Egypt Sheikh Ali Gomaa. Dr. Ali Gomaa is widely respected as one of the world's most influential Muslim scholars. His authority extends far beyond Egypt, where he acts as the official interpreter of Islam, making the sacred law relevant to the contingencies of contemporary daily life. Sheikh Ali Gomaa belongs to an elite group of Islamic academics whose works shape Muslim lives across the Islamic World. Unlike most of his peers, however, Sheikh Ali Gomaa also commands respect amongst intellectuals, policy-makers and religious leaders outside the lands of Islam – in particular in Europe and the United States. Some of the reasons underlying Sheikh Ali Gomaa's exceptional reach are discussed in this book. Despite his local and international stature, Sheikh Ali Gomaa had nevertheless not received the attention his contribution to Islamic thought and practice deserves in European languages. This book thus provides a much needed corrective to this neglect in the English-language scholarship.

Sheikh Ali Gomaa's unusual eclecticism marks him off as an exceptional figure in the contemporary world, able to speak to multiple audiences and to respond to their specific demands and expectations. His followers and admirers accordingly include individuals from various walks of life and from different corners of the world. In this book we have treated the various dimensions of Sheikh Ali Gomaa's life and thought in relative isolation. It is clear, however, that the different facets of the Grand Mufti – the author, the jurist, the mufti, the public intellectual, the civic promoter, the interfaith partner, the moral guide – are harmoniously combined in the personality of Sheikh Ali. The Sheikh is in this regard an apt exemplar of

Egypt’s long-standing tradition of excellence in Islamic Studies. In his mastery of Islamic and secular sciences, Sheikh Ali Gomaa embodies the best of the time-honored tradition of Al-Azhar’s scholarship and learning – a tradition that Sheikh Ali has done much to keep alive and to revive in the 21$^{st}$ century.

It is our hope that this book may serve to advance the understanding of the Grand Mufti’s life and thought. In doing so, we also hope to stimulate others to continue exploring the many perspectives Sheikh Ali Gomaa has opened up for his contemporaries, in the field of Islamic Studies (Islamic Law, Sufism, Prophetic biography, Qur’anic Studies) as well as in an impressive range of global issues – from the protection of the environment to the fight against poverty to the war on terrorism.

At 60, Shaykh Ali Gomaa possesses all the commitment, experience and talent necessary to continue to struggle for achieving peace and social justice in light of the Divine – in Egypt, the Muslim ummah, and the world at large.

*The Grand Mufti of Egypt, Dr. Ali Gomaa, is one of the Muslim world's most influential scholars and public intellectuals. He is read widely in the Muslim world, especially amongst Arabic speakers. However, to date, English-language speakers have largely been deprived of an in-depth study of his views. This book seeks to fill this gap by presenting an overview of the life and works of the Grand Mufti, with special attention to his positions on some of the most pressing matters facing both Muslims and non-Muslims in the contemporary world.*

*The reader will be introduced to the major highlights of the Grand Mufti's life, his upbringing and education, his major influences and teachers, and his lengthy career experience serving the global Muslim community ( Umma ) . As well, the reader will be given a thorough survey of the impressive intellectual output of Dr. Gomaa.*

*It is hoped that this work will go some way in introducing the English-speaking world to the important contributions made by Sheikh Ali Gomaa, a man who has been remarkably successful both in his academic pursuits and in his quest for social justice.*

*Ibrahim Negm serves as the senior advisor of the Grand Mufti of Egypt*